THE HORSESHOE TRAIL

by

DONALD BAYNE HOBART

When Solitaire Stevens was feeling proddy, he didn't express it in the usual way; he started whistling instead. Therefore men called him the Whistling Waddy, and those who knew him ran for shelter when they heard his sad little song in a minor key.

In Deerhorn, where Steve rode in with his pal Dismal Day, he wasn't yet known, and therefore his whistling failed to warn the bandits who were about to rob the Deerhorn Bank. When the dust had settled, the robbery had been foiled by the quick-shooting newcomer, assisted by his pard and the local saloon-keeper, and four lifeless bodies lay in the cowtown's main street.

But that wasn't the end of violence, only the beginning. For the leader of the raiders was still free and, having been thwarted once, was all set to try again.

A lusty, pulse-pounding Western about a Horseshoe Bunch that stood not for good luck but for trouble, and a musical cowboy whose song was a death chant.

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THE HORSESHOE TRAIL



CHAPTER I

Solitaire Stevens stared ahead along the dusty road at the little cowtown that was dimly visible in the heat haze. The wide brim of his Stetson shielded his lean face from the hot sun that beat down on his broad shoulders and burned through the cloth of his blue flannel shirt. The two guns he wore in worn leather holsters were heavy against his levis-clad legs. He rode slumped down in the saddle, a big man with muscles aching from the long ride he and his partner had made since sunup that morning. The dust rose like little puffs of smoke beneath the hoofs of the two horses.

"I've got a feelin' we're heading into trouble," Dismal Day said, his brown eyes also fixed on the town ahead. "Makes me plumb uneasy, Solitaire. You know how I hate violence."

Solitaire smiled, but there wasn't much amusement in it. He was so used to the grim forebodings of disaster upon the part of the little man who rode with him that Dismal's words meant very little. Day enjoyed a good fight of any kind, and if trouble didn't find him he was likely to go looking for it.

"You hope!" said Solitaire dryly. "You can't fool me, Dismal. For the past three days you've been itching for a fight. What did you do back in Steam City when that trail boss paid us off after we helped deliver his herd to the railroad pens?"

"Took the money, counted it, and stuck it in my

pocket," said Dismal. "Just like you did."

"Sure!" Solitaire grinned. "But you didn't need to tell the trail boss he reminded you of a gorilla you knew when you worked in the circus, only the ape was better-looking."

"You ever see that gorilla?" Dismal demanded.

"No," said Solitaire.

"Then what do you know about it?" snorted Dismal. "That he was a heap prettier than the trail boss. Smarter, too."

They had reached the north end of Deerhorn. Buildings lined both sides of the single street, weather-beaten structures of wood and logs and even adobe, all sweltering in the hot sunlight. It was extremely warm in this part of Texas, even for July.

The little cowtown was quiet; evidently the morning heat was too much for the local citizens and they were keeping under cover as much as possible. The only person in sight was a big man in worn and dust-powdered range clothes who was standing on the plank walk in front of the Deerhorn Bank.

Solitaire didn't like the sullen, unshaven face of the big man, nor the way he glared at them as they rode toward him. There were four saddle horses standing at a nearby hitch-rail, but their reins were not tied to the bar or even draped over it. They were wrapped loosely around the horn of the saddle on each horse.

Dismal studied the horses, then glanced quickly at Solitaire. These two had trained themselves to observe everything around them swiftly. There had been times when they had found it much safer to do so. Solitaire nodded as he caught the meaning of Dismal's glance. They were still far enough up the street for the big man not to be able to overhear what they said.

"The gents who ride them horses must have a lot of faith in their mounts or figure on going somewhere in a hurry," said Dismal. "Not one of the horses is tied to the rail." He sighed mournfully. "Just like I always say, it's a wicked world, Solitaire."

"That jasper on the walk could be guarding the horses," said Solitaire thoughtfully. "He's close enough to grab the reins if those nags start drifting." He frowned thoughtfully. "There's something about that feller makes me think we aren't going to like him."

"Why should we get fond of strangers?" asked Dismal. "Specially one with a face that looks like it was carved out of a rock, and somebody got tired before

they finished the job. Me, I don't like that hombre at all."

"We better do something about it," said Solitaire, and his voice was suddenly hard.

"And right now," agreed Dismal.

He rode on down the street and passed the bank without even glancing at the man on the walk. Solitaire made no attempt to follow Dismal's roan. He was holding his pinto to a walk and waiting, unconsciously whistling a strange, sinister tune which was always a signal that he was in a dangerous mood.

From inside the square, one-story adobe bank building came a muffled cry for help. Then from the

interior of the bank a gun roared.

Solitaire grew tense and wary as he heard it. It was a familiar sound to a man who had gained a reputation as a trouble shooter because he happened to be fast and accurate with a pair of six-guns. He stopped whistling, and his right hand went to the butt of the gun in the holster on his right hip, while his left gripped the pinto's reins a bit tighter.

The man on the walk stepped swiftly to the nearest of the horses. He reached for the reins that were wrapped around the saddle horn on the bay and got them unfastened. He leaped back with an oath of surprise as a bullet from Solitaire's right-hand gun thudded into the end post of the hitch-rail. The man whirled, his sweat-gleaming face contorted with rage. He was still holding onto the reins of the bay with

his left hand.

"Leave those horses alone!" snapped Solitaire.

"Blast you!" the man shouted, grabbing for his gun.

It was an idiotic move on his part, but he was so mad he didn't stop to think. Solitaire fired again. The man howled in pain as a bullet scraped his right wrist and drew blood. His Colt dropped to the plank walk with a thud, but the other hand clung to the reins.

The four horses didn't care for the shooting. They kicked and snorted. Three of them found there was nothing to restrain them and whirled and went tearing down the street, making a lot of clatter. The bay tried to follow the other horses, but his owner held him back.

Three men dashed out of the bank with guns ready, and they were grim menacing figures in the bright sunlight. Bandanna masks hid the lower part of their faces, and the brims of their hats were pulled down, shading their eyes. Two of them carried money bags. They were all dressed in dirty, nondescript range clothes. The first man to leap to the plank walk shouted angrily as he saw the three swiftly retreating horses.

"What the devil, Doyle?" he yelled. "You damn fool! Why did you let them horses get away?"

The big man named Doyle didn't try to answer. He was having trouble enough with the bay. The horse was rearing and bucking and trying to pull the reins out of Doyle's grasp.

Solitaire wasn't making any foolish moves either. At sight of the three masked men, he sent the pinto galloping across the street, slowed the horse and swung out of the saddle, dropping the reins. He had no intention of being a nice life-sized target in the middle of the street for three bank robbers.

"Stand still, horse," he muttered as he ducked behind a watering trough, yanking out his other gun. "You'll live longer that way if the bullets start flying."

On Solitaire's side of the street a tall, stout man barged out through the swinging doors of a saloon with a rifle in his hands. He wore no hat, and the top of his bald head was sunburned a bright red. He wore a white shirt and a shoestring tie, ordinary pants and cowboy boots. He didn't have any gunbelt or holstered gun. He stepped back against the wall to the left of the swinging door of the saloon and raised the rifle to his shoulder. He took careful aim at the nearest bank robber and pulled the trigger.

The crack of the rifle was a whip-like sound in a sudden silence. The masked man reeled back as a bullet plowed into his chest. He seemed to be bowing to an unseen audience, and then sprawled face down in the dust of the street to remain there motionless.

The guns of the other two outlaws blazed, bullets thudding into the wall behind the stout man as he quickly leaped to one side, and got behind a post that supported the overhang that ran along the front of the saloon. As he watched, Solitaire decided that the stout man knew exactly what he was doing.

Solitaire rested his right arm on the edge of the watering trough and took careful aim. He fired, and one of the outlaws who was carrying a money bag dropped to the walk as the bullet got him in the heart.

The stout man's rifle cracked again, and the slug got the third bank robber in the head. Doyle was still struggling with his horse, trying to get the prancing animal to stand still long enough for him to get into the saddle. He yelled a wild protest as he looked across the street and saw the rifle in the stout man's hands swing in his direction. The rifle roared for a third time. Doyle let go of the reins, his knees buckled and he went down, shot through the heart. Reins dragging or not, his horse went away from there.

Men appeared from the buildings all up and down the street, but if there were any women and children in the town they remained under cover. Down below, Dismal Day was collecting a bunch of horses that had come tearing in his direction, and finding it a job that called for skill, patience and profanity.

Solitaire stood up, his six-foot-two frame towering high above the watering trough. He reloaded his right-hand gun, after putting the other Colt back where it belonged. Then he thrust the second gun back into the holster. He took off his hat; his thick dark hair and strong face were heavy with perspiration. He lifted the neckerchief that hung around his neck and mopped off his face with it.

The town seemed oddly quiet, now that the roaring of the guns had died away. In front of the saloon the stout man slowly lowered his rifle. He seemed to do it reluctantly, as if he were sorry there was no one else around for him to kill. Then abruptly he laughed, a booming merry sound in the stillness. Apparently he considered the whole thing a good joke.

Solitaire saw that his pinto was still standing ground-hitched right where his rider had left him. The horse had shown good sense, for he had been out of the line of fire.

"Told you that you'd be safer that way," Solitaire said, giving the horse a slap on the flank as he passed.

He headed for the front of the saloon. The big man watched Solitaire approach, and he was no longer amused. He stood waiting, the rifle held carelessly in his hands. The big moon face was expressionless, but gray-green eyes studied the tall stranger as Solitaire came closer and then halted.

"Kind of overdid it a little, didn't you?" demanded Solitaire, his tone almost too mild. "That last name you downed wasn't even armed."

"He wasn't?" The stout man's voice was deep. He tried to look surprised, but didn't quite succeed.

"Shucks, I didn't even notice. Who are you?" He voiced the question with an air of authority, as if he had the right to ask it.

"Solitaire Stevens," Solitaire said. "Just a visitor in your busy town, you might say."

The stout man managed to smile. "I'm Reece Shadwell, owner of the Flowing Cup Saloon here." He made it sound important. "Solitaire Stevens, eh? Seems like I've heard that name before."

"Not so often as I have, I reckon," Solitaire said dryly.

For an instant they just stood there looking at each other. Solitaire was surprised to find that Shadwell was slightly taller than he was, and the saloon owner was not only stout but big. Solitaire would have been willing to bet that Shadwell weighed close to three hundred pounds.

Then Solitaire smiled faintly and turned deliberately away.

Solitaire calmly watched a crowd gather around the four bodies sprawled out in the dust across the street. Again he started whistling his weird little tune. He reserved those minor notes for his thoughtful as well as his dangerous moods.

Shadwell listened to the whistling for a moment, and then frowned and looked at Solitaire with new interest. "Yeah, I know now," the saloon keeper exclaimed. "I knew I'd heard that Solitaire name before somewhere. You're the Whistling Waddy."

"Been called that," agreed Solitaire. He turned and looked directly at the stout man, his blue eyes friendly. "Let's take a close look at those gents we downed."

"Yeah, let's do that." Shadwell smiled, and it was no longer forced. "Come on."

They walked across the street to where a middleaged, rawboned man with a sheriff's star on his vest had taken charge. Tall and thin and gangling, he looked more like a farmer than a lawman.

"That's Sheriff Matt Gilford," Shadwell told Solitaire. "Honest as the day is long, but not too bright."

"Keep back, everybody!" Sheriff Gilford ordered importantly. "Don't crowd too close. Couple of you men pick up them money bags and tote 'em back into the bank!"

Dismal Day rode up the street, leading by the reins the four horses that the bank robbers would never need again. He looked mournful and hot, too. His levis and flannel shirt were wringing wet, and even the holster of the gun he wore on his right leg was a bit damp around the edges. Catching the horses had been quite a job.

"Your pard?" Reece Shadwell asked Solitaire, his eyes fixed on the wiry little man on the roan. "You rode into town together, I noticed."

"Don't miss much, do you, Shadwell?" Solitaire said with a smile.

"Hey!" shouted Dismal as he rode up. "Anybody

want these horses?" He nodded toward the dead men. "Don't reckon them hombres need 'em any longer."

"Take the horses up to the sheriff's office and leave them tied to the hitch-rail," ordered Matt Gilford. "We'll tend to them later."

"Thank you 'most to death," said Dismal, as he rode on by, still leading the horses. "And keep the change."

A tall, gray-haired man in funeral black appeared in the doorway of the bank. He had dark eyes and a long thin face, and he looked like an undertaker of the old school. A hush swept over the crowd at sight of him.

"The head man around here?" Solitaire asked softly.

"Ward Barlow, president and owner of the Deerhorn Bank," answered Shadwell in an equally low tone. "We will now have a speech filled with sound, fury and bromides, meaning nothing."

"My fellow citizens!" Ward Barlow spoke in loud ringing tones that carried to everyone in the crowd. "Thanks to the quick work of our leading townsman, Reece Shadwell, who killed four men with his rifle at the risk of his own life, the attempt to rob the Deerhorn Bank has been a failure!"

A cheer rose from the crowd. Barlow bowed as if he had been running for some high political office and had just promised all the local ranchers free cattle.

"We are more fortunate than were the citizens

of Red Gulch just a week ago when the bank there was successfully robbed," Barlow went on loudly. "Fortunately no citizen or bank employee was killed during the holdup here. Ed Lance, the teller, was slightly wounded when one of the bandits shot him, but that was all."

"Bet you can hear him bellowing for two miles on a clear day when the wind is right," Solitaire said softly.

"Make it three miles," Shadwell said with a chuckle.

The banker's gaze roved over the crowd and he spotted the stout saloon owner. He raised one long black-clad arm and beckoned with a hand so thin and white that it reminded Solitaire of that of a skeleton.

"Come over here, please, Mr. Shadwell," boomed the voice of the bank president. "I want to thank you personally on behalf of all of us who owe you a debt of gratitude."

"You better thank this hombre with me, too, Barlow," Shadwell called, and nodded toward Solitaire. "He tangled with the man guarding the robbers' horses and kept them from riding away."

"Then by all means bring him up with you, Shadwell," said Barlow pompously. "Let them through, please, men."

Spectators in front of the bank moved aside to allow Shadwell and Solitaire to reach the bank door. As they made their way through, Solitaire saw two

men in the crowd studying him intently. One was slender and dark and wore a mustache. He was dressed in the dark clothing and white linen of a professional gambler. His face was extremely handsome. The other man, dressed in worn range garb, was thinfaced, and his eyes were dark and hard.

Solitaire found he had been right when he had said Reece Shadwell missed very little. The saloon keeper had noticed the way the two men were studying the new arrival in town.

"Ace Tyler and Vance Rand," he said to Solitaire in a low tone. "They would make dangerous enemies."

"I'm trembling in my boots," Solitaire said dryly. "Anyhow, they couldn't be enemies of mine, seeing as I never even seen them before, much less met them."

"You will," said the saloon owner.

He chuckled and moved on, with Solitaire following close behind him.

CHAPTER II

Solitaire Stevens and Reece Shadwell stood on either side of Ward Barlow as the banker made another long-winded speech. It was blazing hot there on the street, and Solitaire, tired and dusty, also felt a little silly.

"And so we have these two men to thank for protecting us and our children, our wives, mothers and sisters," declaimed Barlow; "for proving that those who are greedy and live by the rule of the gun will die by the same weapon."

Curiosity satisfied and interest waning, the crowd began drifting away. Idly, Solitaire noticed that the two men Shadwell had identified as Ace Tyler and Vance Rand were among the first to leave.

Dismal Day had left the bandits' horses tied to a hitch-rail in front of the sheriff's office and ridden back down the street. He sat his saddle, listening, as Barlow went on orating. The banker's flowery talk seemed to make Dismal look all the more mournful.

"All right, Ward," Shadwell said impatiently. "You've done enough spouting; cut it short."

"And so we gratefully thank these two men," Barlow finished with a frown. "That is all I have to say."

At orders from Sheriff Gilford the bodies of the four bank robbers were carried away to the local undertaking establishment. The tag end of the crowd departed. Solitaire found himself standing alone in front of the bank with Shadwell and Ward Barlow. Still sitting in his saddle out on the street, Dismal looked on solemnly.

"What's the idea of stopping me, Shadwell?" demanded Barlow, cold anger in his tone. "I didn't like that!"

"You talk too much, Barlow," Shadwell told him bluntly.

The banker and the saloon owner glared at each other. Solitaire strolled away, across the plank walk and down onto the street. He didn't want to listen to a quarrel between two men he had never seen before. They might expect him to take sides, and he wasn't sure he liked either of them enough for that.

Dust stirred beneath his feet as he walked to where his pinto stood in front of the saloon with reins dragging. He picked up the reins, led the horse to the watering trough, unfastened the bridle and slipped out the bit and let the pinto drink.

Dismal rode over and watered his roan. Then the

two men put the bridles back in place and tied the reins to the hitch-rail as they led the horses over there. Dismal loosened the saddle cinch as Solitaire eased the saddle on the pinto. Then Dismal moved back and gazed at Solitaire as if he had never seen him before.

"Let me take a good look," he said. "Don't believe I ever did see a real hero up to now. And here you are, large as life and twice as natural. You reckon these folks aim to give you a medal or something?"

"You're just jealous," Solitaire said with a grin. "Anyhow, you caught the horses, didn't you?"

"And a lot of thanks I got for it!" Dismal sighed. "Me chasing horses while you were having all the fun. That stout hombre seems a right salty jigger."

"Reece Shadwell, you mean?" Solitaire said, and then as Dismal nodded: "He owns this saloon, the Flowing Cup."

"He also kills everybody in sight when he cuts loose with a rifle." Dismal took off his hat and scratched his head. "You know what, Solitaire? A man who goes around shooting regardless like that is plumb dangerous."

"Might be." Solitaire glanced across the street where Shadwell was still talking to Barlow in front of the bank. The two did not apear to be quarreling now. Had the apparent antagonism been just a pose, and if so, why? "I've been wondering about the way

Shadwell was shooting."

"I was way down at the other end of the street," said Dismal. "But I wasn't even sure me and the horses were safe when that rifle started booming."

Sheriff Gilford came out of the undertaker's and glanced around. He spotted Solitaire and Dismal and came across the street toward them with purposeful stride.

"Want to talk to you two," he announced as he reached them and halted. "I'm Sheriff Matt Gilford. Who are you?"

"I'm Dismal Day," said Dismal. "And this is Solitaire Stevens. Some folks call him the Whistling Waddy."

"Why?" demanded Gilford.

Dismal grinned. "You see, Sheriff, when some folks get mad they spit in your eye or something like that, but when Solitaire is feeling proddy he starts whistling, and then look out! Of course there are times when he just whistles when he is feeling happy."

"I see," said the sheriff. "I've been wondering what you two are doing in town?"

"You know, I've been wondering the same thing," said Solitaire.

"But now it's hot, and I'm thirsty. How about having a drink with us, Sheriff?"

"Don't mind if I do," said the lawman. "Like you say, it is hot."

The three of them passed under the overhang and entered the saloon through the swinging doors, with Sheriff Gilford in the lead. It was a little cooler inside, but still warm. There were six men in the place beside the bartender.

Solitaire saw the gambler, Ace Tyler, sitting alone at a table idly ruffling a deck of cards. The lean-faced man named Vance Rand stood by himself drinking at the far end of the bar. The other four customers were dressed in range clothes and looked like gunslicks to Solitaire. They did not appear in the least interested as the sheriff, Solitaire and Dismal lined up at the bar, and yet Solitaire was sure they were sizing up his partner and himself, weighing the fact they were now with the sheriff and wondering how much or how little that might mean.

"First thing I want is a drink of water," Solitaire told the bartender. "Adam's ale, like the feller said."

The barkeeper reminded Solitaire of an old gray owl in a greasy apron. He blinked when he heard Solitaire's order, but poured a glass of water and passed it along the bar.

"I'll take two fingers of red-eye," said Dismal.

"Me, too," said the sheriff. "But make it some of your good liquor, Martin. That goes for all three of us."

Martin, the gray owl, placed a bottle and glasses in front of the three men. Vance Rand turned and

stared at them. Solitaire drank the glass of water and stared back.

"I've seen you some place before," Rand said finally. He spoke sullenly, with a restless drive to the words despite his low drawling tone.

"Could be, Mr. Rand." Solitaire nodded solemnly. "I've been there."

"How did you know my name?" demanded Rand, his face hardening. Solitaire sensed that here was a man who was careful to cover his back trail.

"Meant to tell you about that, first chance I got," Solitaire said, pouring himself a drink from the bottle of whiskey. "Ran across a feller in Steam City, and he said, 'If you ever get to Deerhorn, first thing you do is look up Vance Rand. You'll find him a mighty interesting hombre."

"Oh, he did, eh?" said Rand, wary but obviously curious. "And what was that feller's name?"

"Seems to me it was Jones or maybe Smith—I don't rightly remember." Solitaire deliberately winked. "He knew you all right, though."

"Maybe you mean Johnny Smith," Rand said slowly and thoughtfully. "Short, stocky man with a knife scar on his right cheek?"

"Sure," Solitaire said. "Your description fits him right good."

Rand looked him up and down, cool contempt in his expression. His right hand rested carelessly on the

belt of his levis just above the butt of the gun in his holster.

"I don't know what game you're playing, or give a hoot," Rand said, and scorn was a biting thing in his voice. "But I'm not having any. I never knew a man named Johnny Smith who looked like that in my life."

He turned and walked out the saloon without looking back. Solitaire took a quick sip of his drink, feeling like a fool as he did so.

The four other gunslicks walked over to the table where Ace Tyler sat. They were still apparently not in the least interested in Sheriff Gilford and his companions as they seated themselves at the table with the gambler, but their casual disregard of the trio didn't seem quite genuine to Solitaire. Tyler produced chips, the four men paid for their stacks, and they began to play poker.

"Just who is Vance Rand?" Solitaire asked the sheriff.

"He owns a little spread over in the eastern end of the valley," Gilford said in his dry voice. "Those four men over there playing cards with Ace Tyler are Rand's cowboys."

The three men at the bar had been paying no attention to Martin, the bartender, but he had been listening to their conversation with interest.

"That feller Doyle who got killed with the bank

robbers was one of Vance Rand's outfit," he said suddenly. "Heard he joined the Rolling R a week or so ago."

"Out of the mouths of babes and bartenders comes the most enlightening information," said Solitaire. "What you just said is food for thought, Martin."

"It sure is," agreed Dismal, pouring himself another drink. "Now if I was sheriff of this county I'd find that right interesting."

"You're not the sheriff." Gilford said quietly.

"Which might be a back-handed way of telling us to mind our own business," Solitaire said, a sudden coldness creeping into his voice. "Nice meeting you, Sheriff. See you around." He tossed a silver dollar onto the counter to pay for the drinks. "Come on, Dismal, let's go."

The sheriff frowned but said nothing as they turned and walked away from the bar. Outside the swinging doors of the saloon, they halted on the plank walk and looked at each other. The heat from the street seemed to rise up and push against their faces. Solitaire sighed, and Dismal looked more mournful than ever.

"We made a mistake, Dismal," Solitaire said. "We forgot to find out which side the sheriff is on first off."

"All right," said Dismal. "You tell me: which side is it?"

"I don't know," Solitaire said thoughtfully. "I've got an idea that Matt Gilford plays his cards pretty close to his vest. Maybe he's a friend of Vance Rand, and maybe he isn't."

"Oh, sure." Dismal grinned. "It will be a nice day tomorrow if it doesn't rain."

They had stepped out from beneath the shade of the overhang. The sun was hot on their backs as they stood there, but they didn't move on at once. Their attention had been drawn to three riders who were coming along the street from the lower end of the town.

The man who rode on the left had a gray mustache and a hawk-like face. He was wearing expensive range clothes, and rode a spirited black horse. There was an air of authority as well as casual ease about him. Here was a man who had not the slightest doubt that he was king of his own domain. He handled the reins with the unconscious sureness of one who had spent years in the saddle, and was always master of his horse, no matter how skittish the animal might be.

"Who is that?" Solitaire asked.

"How do I know?" demanded Dismal impatiently. "He never told me. He's got a couple of salty-looking jiggers riding with him. They are all riding horses with a Triangle brand." Dismal glanced across the street. "Here comes your pard, Reece Shadwell. Maybe he knows them fellers."

The big saloon owner was coming across the street. Barlow had gone back into the adobe building that housed the bank. Shadwell moved deliberately so that the three riders had to slow their horses to keep from riding him down. Shadwell paid no attention.

"Don't hurry none, Shadwell," called a wiry, hard-faced man who was riding close on the right of the gray-mustached man. "We've got all day to get where we're going."

Shadwell plodded on across the street. He reached the plank walk and stepped up on it before he turned and spoke.

"You better muzzle that wolf of yours, Adam Norton," he growled. "I don't like Mark Lucan telling me what to do."

"Sorry, Reece," said Adam Norton meekly. He was the rancher with the gray mustache. "Mark didn't mean any harm."

Mark Lucan snorted, looking like a pretty mean old lobo wolf at that. The third rider, a good-looking young blond man, spoke.

"I didn't think you'd let anyone give your orders, Dad," he said in a surprised tone.

"Never mind, Buck," Norton said quickly. "Don't forget that Reece Shadwell and I are old friends."

"And sound like a couple of dear old enemies," Dismal said softly to Solitaire.

At that moment Solitaire caught a gleam of metal

on the top of the flat roof of a feed store next to the bank across the street. There was something sinister in that glint of sunlight on blue steel. He began to whistle his weird little tune.

"Oh, my!" moaned Dismal, as he heard the strange melody that came from the puckered lips of his partner. "Here we go again!"

CHAPTER III

As Solitaire saw a face peering down over the edge of the roof—a face lined up behind a carbine—his hand flashed to the gun on his right hip. The weapon came up roaring. The horses out in the street pranced excitedly and reared at the sound.

Up on the roof a man slid forward as Solitaire's bullet hit him, came hurtling down and landed on the plank walk with a thud.

Solitaire discovered that he and Dismal were covered by the guns of the three riders, for as Stevens had fired it had looked as if he had been aiming at the horsemen.

Shadwell stood a little distance away, his fat face and sunburned bald head glistening in the hot sunlight. The rifle he had used so recklessly still stood against the wall in front of the saloon, and he made no attempt to reach for it. He drew a cigar out of his 1

vest, bit off the end, and thrust the cigar into his mouth.

"What's the idea?" snapped Adam Norton, glaring at Solitaire.

"He wasn't shooting at you," Dismal said impatiently. "Look across the street before you start getting so proddy."

The three riders glanced back and saw the dead man lying there. A startled expression crossed Adam Norton's hawk-like face. Buck frowned and looked quickly at his father. Mark Lucan merely stared at the huddled figure, and then all three looked at Solitaire questioningly as he stood with both his guns again in leather.

"He tried to get you from the roof of the feed store with a rifle," explained Solitaire quietly, his voice carrying in a sudden hush that lingered over the dusty street. "I've got an idea he didn't like you, Mr. Norton."

"I see," Norton said thoughtfully, and slowly thrust his gun back into the holster. Lucan and Buck Norton also dropped their Colts back into leather. The rancher scowled. "I don't like this. See who it was, Mark."

Mark Lucan rode across the street. He dismounted, dropping his reins and ground-hitching his horse. He rolled the dead man over and stared down at the hard face. At that moment Sheriff Gilford stalked out of the saloon, and he looked plenty dangerous.

"Now what?" he demanded grimly.

"I'm afraid a feller got killed, Sheriff," Dismal said dryly. "I sure admire the way you get around after things happen."

"I was in the poker game when I heard the shot," snapped Gilford. "Got out here fast as I could."

"Don't know him, Boss," called Lucan, as he looked up from his examination of the dead man. "He's a stranger to me."

"Who shot him?" barked the sheriff.

"I did," said Solitaire. "He was aiming to dry-gulch Mr. Norton here from the roof of the feed store."

"Why?" Gilford's tone was curt.

"He didn't tell me," Solitaire said, and shrugged.

"That's the trouble with this town," growled the sheriff. "Nobody knows anything, and not much of that."

He marched across the street, kicking up the dust with his feet like an angry boy.

Norton and his son rode over to the hitching rail and swung out of their saddles. They fastened their reins to the rail; then Adam Norton strode over to Solitaire and held out his right hand.

"Looks like I owe you my life," he said. "If there is anything I can ever do for you, just ask it." His tone grew important. "I'm Adam Norton, owner of the Triangle outfit."

"Biggest ranch in this part of the country," said

Buck Norton as he joined his father, and there was pride in his voice. "I'm Buck Norton, and I'm thanking you, too. What's your name?"

"Solitaire Stevens," said Solitaire. He shook hands with Norton and Buck. "This is my partner, Dismal Day. Glad I happened to see that jasper on the roof."

"So am I," Norton said fervently. "But why would anyone want to kill me?"

"That's what I call an interesting question," said Reece Shadwell as he stood watching and listening. Then, letting out a booming laugh, he picked up his rifle and turned and walked into the saloon.

For a second time that day a crowd began to gather on the streets of Deerhorn, women and children joining their men folk this time. The sheriff was once more in charge as Mark Lucan stepped away from the body. As was typical of range-bred men Lucan swung into the saddle to ride across the street. He abruptly halted his horse, dismounted and tied his reins to the rail and then walked over to where the four men stood on the plank walk.

He looked thoughtfully at Solitaire and Dismal. His hard dark eyes swept over them, his gaze lingering for an instant on the two guns in the holsters on Solitaire's lean hips.

"You shoot fast," he said.

"Lucan is my foreman and bodyguard," Norton said quickly. "Mark, this is Solitaire Stevens and Dismal Day."

Lucan merely nodded, still staring at the two strangers.

"You figure you need a bodyguard?" Solitaire asked the rancher.

"I do." Norton nodded, an old man lonely in the power that he still clung to so hard. "There are folks in this part of the country who hate me."

Mark Lucan yawned and turned away. There was something insulting about the way he did it, as if he did not consider Solitaire and Dismal worthy of further interest upon his part.

Dismal was watching the sheriff, who was searching through the pockets of the dead man. Dismal caught Solitaire's eye and nodded in the direction in which he had been looking. Solitaire glanced at the lawman in time to see Gilford examining something that looked like a bent metal rod. Norton followed the gaze of the two men. The rancher uttered a sharp exclamation and shivered as if from a sudden chill.

"No, that just can't be! Unless they've come back." He seemed to be talking half to himself. "But that couldn't be. They're all dead, even Slash Lawson."

"Of course they are, Dad," Buck said quickly. "All of them are gone. They can't come back."

Mark Lucan swung around and was watching the Nortons. He seemed like an old wolf waiting to pounce.

"I wonder," he said. Suddenly he was wide-awake and there was a mocking note in his voice. "Sometimes you can't be sure of things like that."

"It doesn't matter." Adam Norton sounded old and tired. "It isn't important. I was just thinking—didn't mean a thing." He turned to his son as though finding comfort in the very presence of the younger man. "Come on, Buck. Let's go up to the general store and order the supplies for the ranch. Want 'em ready when the cook drives in with the wagon this afternoon."

He looked at Solitaire and Dismal as if he had never seen them before. Solitaire decided that Norton acted as if he had received a great shock and it had left him dazed and only vaguely aware of his surroundings. He turned and started slowly up the street, his footsteps heavy on the plank walk.

Buck Norton followed his father, and the rancher's son appeared worried. He hastened his steps so that in a few moments he was walking beside the elder man. Norton's foreman and bodyguard swept a glance at Solitaire, ignoring Dismal completely, and then yawned.

"You keep on doing that and sometime you'll swallow a bullet," Dismal said impatiently.

Mark Lucan didn't bother to answer. He swung around and trailed after the Nortons, but he didn't seem in any hurry about it. Across the street Sheriff Gilford was superintending the removal of the dry-

gulcher's body to the undertaking establishment, while the crowd watched blank-faced.

"That undertaker sure does a nice business in this town," Dismal remarked. "You noticed the name on his place? Chester Coffin."

"We've got to find out more about that, Dismal, and I've an idea it won't be a safe job. Who did Norton mean when he said, 'Unless they've come back. . . . But they're all dead?' Why is he scared of Reece Shadwell? Why does Lucan boss the boss?"

"How do I know?" said Dismal impatiently. "Here I'm roasting in the hot sun, and you're asking me riddles. Let's put our horses away and go see if we can get a room in the hotel in this town. If I've got to help you worry, I want to do it in comfort."

"All right," said Solitaire. "Then let's go."

Solitaire and Dismal rode their horses to the livery stable, where they arranged for the pinto and the roan to be fed and kept until wanted. The stable man was an old-timer who looked a lot like an ancient gray mule.

"I seen it all," he said in a surprisingly powerful voice for a man of his age. "Was sitting out in front of the stable smoking my pipe when the trouble at the bank started. Sam Craig don't miss much that goes on in this town, I tell you. You gents sure been right busy."

"Just haven't had a chance to get our breath," said

Dismal. "You'd be surprised what peaceful folks we are when we get to breathing easy."

"We figure on sticking around town for a while and resting our saddles," said Solitaire. "Where's the best place to stay, Mr. Craig?"

"Out of trouble," said Craig with a chuckle.

"Before such pearls of wisdom I'm speechless," Dismal said sadly.

He picked up a hammer, a screw-driver and a wrench lying on a bench near the stable door and began juggling them expertly. During the time that Dismal had spent traveling with the circus he had been a clown, a juggler and an acrobat, and he hadn't forgotten any of the tricks.

"Where can we get a room in this town, Craig?" he asked.

"At the Palace Hotel." Craig watched the tools flying through the air with fascinated gaze. His ears almost seemed to stick forward on each side of his old mule-like face. "It's right down the street."

"Good," said Solitaire, studying the old stable keeper and wondering just what sort of a part Craig played among the citizens of the town. "Come on, Dismal. Let's go there."

Dismal let the wrench fall behind him, then kicked it back up in the air with his boot-heel. He caught it while still juggling the hammer and the screwdriver, and then handed the tools to the stable keeper.

"You try it," he said to Craig. "It's simple when

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you know how."

Solitaire walked on away from the front of the stable. The roan and the pinto stood ground-hitched, waiting to be led into the building. Dismal turned a handspring and followed his partner, walking calmly along as if he had done nothing out of the ordinary.

"Agitated grasshoppers," said Sam Craig, his voice carrying to the two men in the hot silence. "Fastshooting acrobats. Them two are bad news for some folks around here, I'm figuring."

"You heard the man, Solitaire," Dismal said softly.
"I always thought you would be the letter bordered in black for somebody."

"Unhuh," said Solitaire. "There have been times when you weren't any happy birthday greeting, either."

Solitaire and Dismal strolled on down the street until they reached the big two-story frame building that was the Palace Hotel.

The lobby was empty now save for Solitaire and Dismal and the slender girl who stood watching them from behind the hotel desk. Sunlight from a nearby window poured down on her, and brought out the blue lights in her thick dark hair. The red dress she wore clung to her well-rounded figure. Her face was lovely with an odd sort of beauty all its own that Solitaire found far more attractive then mere prettiness.

Her hazel eyes watched the two men as they came

closer. Her gaze was frank and friendly, but Solitaire was sure she hadn't missed a detail of the appearance of either one of them. She smiled, revealing even white teeth.

"Welcome to Deerhorn and to the Palace Hotel, boys," she said in a pleasantly husky voice. "I'm Gail Dabney, owner of this hotel."

"Sure glad to meet you, Miss Dabney," Solitaire said, and he was surprised to find how much he actually meant the statement. "I'm Solitaire Stevens, and this feller standing beside me with his mouth open like he was catching flies is Dismal Day. You reckon we could get a room here?"

"Of course," said Gail. "The hotel isn't crowded; I wish it was full. I can give each of you a room if you'd like."

"Now there's an idea!" Dismal quickly recovered from his surprise at discovering the hotel owner was an extremely lovely young woman. "But you better give us rooms near each other in case Solitaire walks in his sleep."

"All right." Gail reached in the rack behind her and drew out two keys. "I'll give you rooms twenty-four and twenty-six. They are next to each other. We serve meals here in the evenings."

Solitaire saw her glance toward the door. Casually he swung around and gazed in the direction she had been looking.

There was no mistaking the tall, handsome man in

the black clothes and white linen who strolled across the lobby with the air of one very much at home in this hotel. Ace Tyler did not appear to notice the two men at the desk as he advanced. His dark eyes were fixed on Gail's face.

"They found a twisted horseshoe in the pocket of the man who tried to kill Adam Norton," Tyler said to Gail as he reached the desk. He ignored Solitaire and Dismal completely, and it was done so deliberately that it seemed an insult. "I just heard about it in the Flowing Cup. There's talk around town, wild talk about the old bunch coming back."

"Oh, no, Ace!" Gail shivered, as though suddenly cold. "Dad was with the ranchers that night last fall, riding through the wind and the rain. He was never well afterward." Her lips quivered, and Solitaire caught a glimpse of a lonely girl whose grief was still with her. "I think that was why he didn't live through the winter."

"I wondered about that," Tyler said, his voice surprisingly gentle. "I guess you're right, Gail. Fred Dabney seemed a changed man after that night that the local men cleaned out the Horseshoe Bunch."

Gail was suddenly conscious that Solitaire and Dismal were standing close by, silently listening. She turned toward them, the hazel eyes searching their faces as if she were anxious to know how much they had overheard and understood. She was still holding the two hotel room keys. Her hand trembled so that

the tags on the keys rattled against them as she passed them to Solitaire.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting," she said. "Here are your keys. You'll find your rooms on the second floor, right up those stairs over there."

CHAPTER IV

Gail's words were a polite but firm dismissal of the two new hotel guests. Reluctantly Solitaire shrugged and turned away. Dismal stood watching, waiting for his partner to move. They headed for the stairs leading up to the second floor of the hotel. Then some sudden impluse made the gambler step away from Gail and move toward them.

"Oh, Stevens," Tyler called. "Just a moment."

There was something in the gambler's tone that made Solitaire whirl, his hand close to the butt of the gun on his right hip. Behind him and a little to one side, Dismal was equally wary.

"What is it, Tyler?" Solitaire asked coldly, his distrust of the man he faced strong within him. "Say it!"

"Call it a sudden impluse." Tyler spoke softly, pleasantly, a faint smile on his face. "A desire upon my part to do a kind deed."

"Maybe you better tell us what's on your mind before you're plumb overcome by your own kindness, Tyler," Dismal said dryly. "Go on—; we're waiting breathlessly."

"All right." Tyler's voice was still friendly. "You'd both better get out of town as soon as you can, if you want to live."

"Meaning you'll do something about it if we don't?" asked Solitaire, and he deliberately made his tone hard.

"Not me." Tyler looked surprised, as if that idea had never occurred to him. "I've seen some samples of your shooting." He smiled. "There are windows in the Flowing Cup Saloon, you know." His tone changed. "No, I don't intend to do anything about it, but somebody else might."

"Vance Rand, for instance?" Solitaire asked, knowing that the question was a stab in the dark.

"I'd be a fool to mention any names." The gambler shrugged, the friendliness gone from his tone. His dark eyes watched the two men, his face again expressionless. "Make your own guess. I have no personal interest in the matter. I was merely trying to be helpful."

"Maybe we should watch out for twisted horseshoes," said Solitaire.

"And dead men," Tyler said grimly.

He turned and walked away, heading for the street entrance of the hotel without looking back.

Solitaire glanced at Gail Dabney, but her back was turned to them as she stared out of a window.

"We were heading up to our rooms, remember?" Dismal's tone was dry.

"That's right." Solitaire swung around. "Let's go."

He went up the stairs with Dismal following. The carpet beneath their feet was thick and clean and their boots made little sound on it. On the second floor they found their rooms and unlocked the door of number twenty-four.

"Right friendly of Tyler to warn us," Dismal said thoughtfully.

"Was it?" Solitaire frowned. "Could be that Tyler has his own reasons for wanting us to get out of town. Still, nothing much has happened to us yet."

He went to the door of room twenty-six, unlocked it and shoved it open.

"I take that back, Dismal," he said in a strange tone.

He stood staring at the gray-haired man who was sprawled on his back on the floor. A man dressed in range clothes, who had a knife sticking in his chest over his heart. On the floor beside the body was what had once been a horseshoe, but now it was twisted out of shape so it formed a short bar.

Dismal joined Solitaire in the doorway and also stood gazing in.

"I hate a knife," Dismal said finally, his voice seeming unusually loud. "There's something sneaky about killing a man that way."

"The door was locked," Solitaire said slowly, hat-

ing himself for the suspicion that lingered in his mind. "She gave us the key to this room, along with the other key. Wonder if Gail Dabney knew what we'd find here?"

"How do I know?" said Dismal. "Could be."

They stepped into the room. The noon sun that gleamed through the window seemed to edge away from the man on the floor. The faces of Solitaire and Dismal were hard. These two had seen death many times in their wanderings, but they didn't like it. Solitaire knelt beside the body and examined it.

"Been dead for some time," he said finally. "I don't know how long."

Dismal went to the window and stared out. The room was at the front of the hotel and he could see the street. It still looked peaceful.

"He's wearing his gun," Solitaire said. "And it hasn't been fired recently."

Behind him the door of the room closed silently, and even though there was no sound he quickly looked back over his shoulder, sensing there was something wrong.

"Dismal!" shouted Solitaire, leaping to his feet. "The door!"

He heard the key turn in the lock even as he reached the door and grabbed the knob to jerk it open. The door did not move. Dismal whirled from the window and rushed to him.

"We're locked in!" Solitaire said with a frown as

he released his grip on the knob. "Now why that?"

"Sheriff Gilford might be right interested in finding us locked in the room with a dead man," said Dismal. "He might even think we killed the gent. If we set our minds and a lot of brute strength to it, we could probably break the door down."

"And make so much noise everybody in the hotel would come running." Solitaire shook his head. "That's not a good idea, Dismal."

"Didn't think much of it myself," said Dismal. "But it was the best I could do at the moment."

"Somebody is trying to frame us for a killing," Solitaire said, his voice hard. "We're going to prove they made a big mistake."

Dismal didn't argue about it one way or the other. He went to the bureau, opened the drawers and searched through them, one after another. Finally he gave a delighted cry.

"Found one!" he said. "Just what I've been looking for—a hairpin that some woman must have left in the drawer when she had this room."

"A hairpin?" Solitaire looked puzzled. "What are you going to do with that?"

"Unlock the door, I hope," said Dismal.

He knelt before the lock and worked for some time, thrusting the hairpin into the keyhole and bending and twisting it around. The key with which Solitaire had opened the door was still in the outside of the lock.

As Dismal worked, Solitaire busied himself going through the clothing of the dead man, searching for some identification of the corpse. He drew a crumpled letter from a pocket of the levis. It was still in the envelope, but the stamp and postmark had been torn off. It was addressed to Lem King, The L Bar K Ranch, Pine Tree Valley, Texas.

"This appears to be a feller named Lem King," Solitaire said. He took the single sheet of paper out of the envelope and read the penciled scrawl. "Listen to this, Dismal."

"I'm listening." Dismal kept working on the lock. "Go ahead."

"'Dear Lem,' "Solitaire read: "'Remember that night last fall when we cleaned out the Horseshoe Bunch? We thought we sneaked Slash Lawson away from the law and hung him then, but we was wrong. I've heard he got away, and ain't buried in that grave beside the big tree like we always figured. He might be coming back to the valley to get us all like he swore he would do that night, so be ready for trouble. Hope this finds you well. Your old friend and exforeman, Dave Hopper.'"

"Looks like Slash Lawson arrived," Dismal said when Solitaire finished reading. "And he didn't like Lem King. Maybe there's something to all the talk around this town about dead men coming back."

"Unhuh." Solitaire stared at the body on the floor. "Dead men who use guns and knives. Dismal, we've

got to get busy and find out who is back of all this, and why the Horseshoe Bunch has come back—if it has. We've got to find out who killed this man, and a lot of other things."

"Sure," said Dismal. "And get into trouble up to our necks while we're wondering what to do with our spare time." He shook his head sadly. "You know what, Solitaire?"

"What?"

"Bullets are right painful when they hit you."

"Shucks! You're not afraid of guns, are you, Dismal?"

"Nope." Dismal grinned. "Only when someone is firing 'em!"

Dismal renewed his efforts on the lock. Solitaire thrust the letter into a pocket of his levis. He picked up the twisted horseshoe and examined it. It was a regular shoe and looked as if someone had bent it straight with his bare hands. He thrust it into his pocket, feeling that it might be a clue he could use later.

"Feller with a name like Slash probably would use a knife," remarked Dismal, the letter still in his mind. He gave a sight of relief as he succeeded in turning the key in the lock. "Got it, I think!"

He stood up and tried the knob. The door opened, and Dismal peered out into the hall. Solitaire stepped to the door, his hands close to the butts of his guns, ready for a quick draw. There was no telling what

might be waiting for the two pards once they stepped out of the room.

"Nobody in the hall," Dismal said in a tone of relief. "Let's get out of here fast."

They slipped silently out into the hall. Solitaire locked the door from the outside and shoved the key into his pocket. Dismal looked at him in surprise.

"What's the idea?" he demanded. "Why take the key?"

"We don't like the rooms Gail Dabney gave us." Solitaire also locked room twenty-four and took the key. "They're on the street side of the hotel, and we figure they'll be too noisy at night."

"Of course that's the only reason we want to change," said Dismal with a grin. "We don't know a thing about any dead man unless somebody tells us about him. Sure must be nice to have beauty as well as brains, like you've got, Solitaire. Wonder who locked us in with the late Mr. King?"

"That's what I hope to find out," Solitaire said grimly, as he headed for the stairs. "Come on."

They went down to the lobby, but didn't hurry as they descended the stairs. They had no intention of giving the impression they were excited about anything. Gail Dabney was behind the hotel desk, talking to a thin, gray-bearded old man in worn range clothes. She introduced him as Ben Murdock.

"Time to take the south-bound stage out," Ben was saying. "It should be ready and waiting at the

Overland station down at the lower end of the street." He frowned. "Got a feeling I won't be driving stage much longer if the railroad runs a spur line through the valley like there is talk of them doing."

"I wouldn't worry about that, Ben," Gail said. "So far the idea of the railroad running a branch line

into the valley is just talk."

The old stage driver merely nodded as he hurried out of the lobby. Dismal stood watching and listening as Solitaire moved closer to the desk. He was conscious of the hazel eyes gazing frankly into his own, the firm yet sweet curve of Gail's lips.

"I'm right sorry, miss." Solitaire put the room keys on the counter. "Dismal and I didn't like the rooms you gave us. They face out on the street and are likely

to be pretty noisy at night."

"That's all right, boys." Gail picked up the keys and thrust them back into the rack with a casual air. "I'll give you two rooms at the back of the house."

Solitaire watched her closely, and decided that if Gail knew there was a dead man in one of the rooms

upstairs, she certainly was taking it calmly.

"Here," she said, handing them two keys. "Rooms sixteen and eighteen. They are at the rear of the hotel on the same floor. I think you'll find them quiet enough."

"Just happened to think," Solitaire said casually as he dropped the keys into his pocket. "Met up with a feller named Lem King who had a ranch in this part of the country. You ever heard of him, Miss Dabney?"

"Why, yes, of course," Gail said with no trace of nervousness. "He owns the L Bar K Ranch thirty miles east of here. Always takes a room at the hotel when he stays in town. He stayed here last night, but my night clerk told me he left early this morning."

"He sure departed all right," said Dismal softly.

"What do you mean by that, Mr. Day?" Gail asked,

looking at Dismal with a puzzled expression.

"Don't mind Dismal," Solitaire said lightly. "He used to be an acrobat with a circus, so half of the time when he opens his mouth he puts his foot in it, Gail."

"Thanks, Solitaire." Gail laughed softly and musi-

cally. "Now I understand everything!"

"Proving you're a heap brighter than we are," said Dismal.

CHAPTER V

Voices came from outside the entrance door of the Palace Hotel, and Sheriff Matt Gilford, Vance Rand and Reese Shadwell strode into the lobby as if they had something important on their minds. The sheriff frowned when he saw Solitaire and Dismal standing at the hotel desk.

"Where is he?" demanded Gilford, his tone truculent. "What did you do with him?"

He halted in front of Solitaire and Dismal and stood glaring at them. Rand and Shadwell were close behind the sheriff, their faces hard and their eyes cold as they silently waited.

"Go on!" the sheriff snapped. "Speak up!"

Solitaire's blue eyes were as cold as those of the men he faced, and yet his voice was calm as he spoke.

"I might, if I knew what you were talking about," he said quietly. "Where is who?"

"The dead man, of course," said Gilford.

"You ought to know, Sheriff," Dismal said dryly. "You've been collecting dead men all morning. Is

one of them missing?"

The sheriff scowled and looked a bit confused.

"Caught you that time, Matt." There was amusement in Reece Shadwell's deep voice, and the coldness was gone from his gaze. "I told you that you weren't dealing with a pair of fools like you seemed to figure."

"I've got a feeling Gilford never was good at figures," said Dismal.

"What's all this talk about a dead man?" demanded Gail anxiously, looking swiftly from one man to another. "What do you mean, Matt?"

"Sorry, Gail," the sheriff said, and his voice was low and kind as he turned to her, "but I've been told a man has been killed in your hotel."

"What man?" Gail asked tensely.

"Lem King, they say," Vance Rand told her, his eyes never leaving Solitaire's face. "I heard Lem was knifed, and that these fellers here did it."

"We didn't do it." Solitaire said firmly. "A hombre named Slash Lawson killed King; at least it looks that way."

"Slash Lawson!" exclaimed Shadwell, fear creeping into his big face and lingering in his words. "But he's dead! We hung him last fall. I saw him stretch rope myself." The saloon owner's deep voice trembled. "He said he'd come back from the dead and get us all! Maybe he's started doing it!"

"You and the rest took the law in your hands that

night, Shadwell." The sheriff's voice was hard with the resentment of a man whose authority had been ignored. "I ain't forgot that, and never will. Nobody has ever proved to me that Slash Lawson was the leader of the Horseshoe Bunch."

"But he was!" There was a strange sort of desperation in Shadwell's insistence. "Not one of the seven of us who captured him that night had any doubt of it. It was because he'd been the blacksmith here in town for years, and someone we thought we all could trust, that we all felt so bad!"

"Dad was one of the seven men who rode that night," Gail said slowly. "He was always sorry about what happened to Slash Lawson."

"Why worry about Lawson?" demanded Vance Rand impatiently. "I told you that I heard this Solitaire Stevens and Dismal Day killed Lem King."

"Seems like you've been hearing a lot, Rand," Solitaire said, glaring at the thin-faced man. "Who told you all this?"

"Just what I've been wondering," said Dismal curtly. "I don't like to be accused of killings. I'm sensitive that way. Keep talking, Rand. Who told you?"

"Ace Tyler told me," Rand said slowly, as though reluctant to reveal the source of his information.

"Not Ace!" exclaimed Gail. "He wouldn't do such a thing! I'm sure of that."

"Kind of funny he'd tell you instead of me, Rand,"

drawled the sheriff, suspicion in his voice. "Information like that should be given to the law."

Rand saw that all four of the other men were

watching him now, and he moved uneasily.

"Reckon I've been talking too fast," he said surlily.
"I was just taking Tyler's word. Me, I didn't know a thing about Slash Lawson. Never even heard of him before."

"That makes three of us who never heard of Lawson before," Solitaire said. "The other two being me and Dismal."

"Then why do you say Lawson killed King?" demanded Sheriff Gilford.

Solitaire was conscious of the three men watching him warily, suspicion in their gaze. "I don't know that Lawson killed King; I was just guessing," he said, speaking slowly and deliberately. "Might as well tell you the whole story now, Sheriff."

"Go ahead," said Gilford. "I'm listening."

Solitaire related what had happened.

"But you didn't say anything about finding a dead man!" Gail protested as Solitaire finished his story. "You just told me you thought those rooms at the front of the house would be noisy."

Their eyes met, and Solitaire was more conscious than ever of the beauty of this slender girl who stood behind the hotel desk.

"The door was locked when we went up to the room," Solitaire said. "You gave us the keys to those

rooms, Gail. We wondered if you knew anything about the killing."

Shadwell, Rand and the sheriff were watching Gail, waiting for her to speak.

"Oh, you thought—" Gail broke off, horror in her face. "You thought I knew about the dead man and had sent you up there to find the body!" Her lip quivered. "But I didn't!"

"Of course you didn't, Gail. You cleared yourself when you told us King had a room in the hotel and that the night clerk said he'd left early this morning," Solitaire said gently. "But you might find out how the clerk was so sure that Lem King had left." Turning to the lawman, he drew the note he had found on the corpse from his pocket. "Here's how we knew about Slash Lawson, Sheriff."

Gilford took the note and read it quickly, then handed it to Shadwell.

"It's from Dave Hopper, who used to be the foreman on Lem King's L Bar K," the sheriff remarked grimly. "Looks like Lawson came back and killed King, all right."

"It sure does," said Shadwell as he finished reading the note and handed it back to the sheriff. He shuddered. "A ghost after us all."

"Never did believe much in ghosts," said Gilford. "Let's get upstairs."

"We still want to know more about this Slash Lawson," said Dismal. "You better tell us the whole thing, or it will keep us awake nights worrying."

Gilford frowned and headed for the stairs. Vance Rand shot a quick glance at Solitaire and Dismal, then followed the sheriff. Reece Shadwell's eyes were twinkling as he stood right where he was, and Solitaire and Dismal waited.

"You've seen the corpse, and I'm not much interested," Shadwell said. "So I'll stay here and tell you what I know about Slash Lawson and the Horseshoe Bunch."

He reached into his shirt pocket and drew out one of the cigars he kept there. "It all started last spring."

"Thought it was fall when this Lawson was lynched," said Solitaire.

"It was." Shadwell bit off the end of the cigar and spit it into a cuspidor, then struck a match and lighted his smoke. "I meant it was spring when the rustling started and folks in the valley learned that the Horseshoe Bunch was riding."

"Nice name for a bunch of rustlers," said Dismal. "Did they call themselves that because they figured it might be lucky, or what?"

"Horseshoes weren't lucky for them in the long run," said Shadwell. "You two know much about the set-up in Pine Tree Valley?"

"Very little," said Solitaire. "Reckon the valley must be around thirty miles wide and maybe fifty miles long."

Accession No.....

"And that's a lot of valley," said Dismal. "We came in from the northeastern end. Most of it that we have been through seems like nice range country. Good grass and plenty of water."

"It is good cattle land," said Shadwell. "But since Steam City is the nearest railroad town, and it is nearly a hundred and fifty miles from here, that means the ranchers have to make a trail drive in order to get their beef cattle headed for market."

"Nothing new about that," said Dismal. "Solitaire and I just finished working with a trail drive outfit bringing a herd in from way over west of here. That was before we left Steam City."

"What about the set-up here?" Solitaire asked.

"There are four ranches in the valley," said the saloon owner, puffing on his cigar. "The largest is Adam Norton's Triangle, next comes Tom Young's Circle Cross, and then Lem King's L Bar K, and Vance Rand's Rolling R. Last spring they all found they were losing stock."

"Rand, too?" Solitaire asked.

"Sure." Shadwell looked at Solitaire in surprise. "Why not? His cattle are just as good as those of the rest of the ranchers, even though he only has a small spread."

Solitaire was conscious of the steady drumming of a horse's hoofs outside on the street. Evidently a rider was coming into town in a hurry. "Slash Lawson was the local blacksmith, as you've heard before," Shadwell went on. "A nice feller, we all thought. Everybody liked him. Of course his first name wasn't really Slash. That was just a nickname that he got after he kind of slashed his way out of a knife fight with three tough hombres when he was younger. His real first name was John."

Shadwell broke off abruptly as a sandy-haired cowboy rushed into the hotel lobby through the front door. His hat was missing, his shirt was torn, and blood was caked on his left cheek.

"Where's the sheriff?" he shouted as he saw the three men. "They told me I'd find him here."

"What's wrong, Farrell?" Shadwell lumbered to his feet, and Solitaire and Dismal got up quickly. "Trouble at the Circle Cross?"

"Plenty!" snapped Farrell. "A bunch of masked men raided the spread this morning in broad daylight. Downed two of our outfit and set fire to a couple of haystacks, stole a herd we were getting ready to drive to Steam City." The cowboy looked around anxiously. "Where's the sheriff?"

"Here I am," said Gilford as he hurried down the stairs, with Rand and Gail close behind him. "What's the matter, Farrell?"

"Masked men raided the ranch and stole a herd," said Farrell as the sheriff came across the lobby. "Killed two of our outfit. The boss is darn near crazy.

Sent me to town to get you and bring you out fast as I could, Sheriff."

"It sounds like Slash Lawson is really back and has brought a bunch of killers with him," observed Shadwell.

CHAPTER VI

By nightfall all of Big Pine Valley was in a turmoil. As soon as Sheriff Gilford heard Bill Farrell's story the lawman rounded up a posse and rode to the Circle Cross. Solitaire and Dismal and Reece Shadwell and Vance Rand were among those who rode with Gilford.

At Tom Young's ranch they found the owner of the spread and six waddies. Young, a gray-haired man in his fifties, was bitter about what had happened, particularly when it was suggested that Slash Lawson and his killer bunch might have raided the ranch.

"Why should Lawson pick on me?" demanded Young. "I wasn't one of the men who tried to lynch him. Does this new Horseshoe Bunch plan to wipe out the whole valley just because Lawson hates seven men?"

"I don't know," said Matt Gilford. "But with the attempted bank robbery, the killing of Lem King, and now this raid on the Circle Cross, I figure we're

sure in for plenty of trouble."

"Then do something about it," snapped Young. "The only bright spot in the whole thing as far as I'm concerned is that my daughter Nancy wasn't home and escaped the danger here." The rancher glared at the sheriff, while the rest of the posse sat in their saddles watching and listening. "You didn't come out here with a big posse just to tell me you're expecting trouble, did you, Sheriff?"

"There's a gent who already has trouble," Dismal said to Solitaire in a low voice. "This Young doesn't need any more."

"I know how you feel, Tom," the sheriff said soberly, "and I am doing something. We're hunting the Horseshoe Bunch right now. We'll clean 'em out before they do any more harm."

The sheriff rode away with his posse. He seemed to know where he was going, but as the hours slipped by Solitaire suspected that Gilford was just guessing where the outlaws might have gone. Finally some of the possemen began to protest.

"We're just working our horses to death for nothing, Sheriff," complained Reece Shadwell. "You haven't any idea at all where those hombres went. It would take days for us to search the whole valley, and you know it."

When more men agreed with Shadwell, the sheriff finally admitted it looked like a wild goose chase and

that the posse might as well head for town. Silently they rode back, and it was dark when they reached Deerhorn and the posse broke up.

Solitaire and Dismal rode to the livery stable on their tired horses. They left their mounts with old Sam Craig and returned to the hotel, where they had supper.

On leaving the dining room they found the hotel lobby deserted.

"We've had a long and right busy day," said Dismal. "What I want to do is turn in and sleep until a week from Thursday. You still got those keys Gail gave you, Solitaire?"

"I have." Solitaire felt in a pocket of his levis and found the keys. "I'm tired, too." He glanced at the hotel desk and saw there did not appear to be anyone working behind the counter. "Wonder if Sheriff Gilford found a chance to question the night clerk?"

"Who cares?" muttered Dismal. "I'm sleepy. Let's go on upstairs."

"Funny place for a hand to be," remarked Solitaire, still staring at the hotel desk.

"Huh?" Dismal looked blank, then followed Solitaire's gaze. "You're right. It sure ain't natural."

There was a hand on the floor sticking out from behind the counter. Solitaire walked around the desk, with Dismal close behind him. They halted abruptly, gazing at a middle-aged bald-headed man dressed in a business suit who was sprawled on the floor, unconscious from a blow on the head.

"Looks like somebody found the night clerk before the sheriff did," Solitaire said grimly. "But why just knock him out?"

"Probably thought they killed him, but didn't have time to make sure of it," suggested Dismal. "Which was a bad mistake on somebody's part. This hombre will likely be able to tell who hit him when he comes out of it."

"Hope so," said Solitaire.

He glanced over his shoulder, conscious of someone behind him. Gail Dabney and Ace Tyler had just entered the lobby through the front door. They walked close together, and her dark hair was windblown.

"What's the matter?" Gail asked anxiously.

"We found a man knocked out back here behind the desk," Solitaire said quietly. "I think he's your night clerk, Gail."

Gail moved around the counter and looked at the man sprawled on the floor. Her face had grown pale, but she held her head proudly as she nodded.

"That's Clem Rockford, my night clerk," she said, her voice low. "You're sure he's not dead?"

The gambler moved beside her protectively, his handsome face expressionless. Gail placed her hand on Tyler's arm as though finding comfort in his nearness.

From the dining room came the hum of voices,

the clink of silver and the rattle of dishes. Those who were still eating there could not see the hotel desk and had no idea that there might be something wrong out in the lobby.

"I'll make sure he is all right." Solitaire knelt and felt Clem Rockford's pulse, conscious that the others were silently watching him. He could feel a faint but steady beat beneath the flesh of the wrist he held. "Seems all right. Got a good steady pulse anyway."

He released the wrist and stood up. Ace Tyler was watching him, his face no longer so blank. There was wariness in the gambler's gaze. His eyes were narrowed, and one long-fingered hand lingered in the left lapel of his black coat.

Shoulder holster beneath the coat, Solitaire thought. Now why that?

The eyes of the two men met, a challenge in their gaze. Solitaire was careful to keep his hands away from his guns, and a faint, mocking expression swept over his face and was gone in an instant.

"You might have knocked Clem out," Tyler said; then he smiled and dropped his hand from his coat. "But I don't believe you did."

Gail breathed a little sigh of relief as she stood on the left of the gambler. She released her grip on his arm.

"Me neither," said Dismal. "I don't believe we did it because I know blame well we didn't." On the floor the bald-headed night clerk moaned and then stirred restlessly. All of them silently watched as he opened his eyes, stared around him and then sat up weakly.

"My head hurts," he said. "What happened?"

"You tell us, Clem," Gail said gently. "These two men found you." She nodded toward Solitaire and Dismal. "You were lying unconscious behind the desk. What happened?"

Rockford shook his head dazedly. Solitaire helped him to his feet and into a chair behind the desk. An oil lamp hanging on a chain behind the desk gleamed down on Rockford's bald head. He had a nasty black and blue spot just above his left temple, but the skin had not been broken and there was no blood.

"I don't know what happened." Rockford frowned. "Guess somebody must have sneaked up behind me and knocked me out. So many folks passing through the lobby that I didn't pay much attention to them."

At that moment a tall gray-haired stranger came into the hotel. His dark burning eyes centered on the group at the desk, and he walked toward them with slow, deliberate steps. He halted when he reached the counter, and when he spoke his voice was deep and strangely hollow.

"Do you know me?" he asked. "Am I anybody you remember?"

"Afraid not," said Solitaire. "Might be I'd recall

meeting you some place if you told me your name."

"My name was left behind me in the black shadows," said the gray man. "I can't remember what it was, but I'm sure men will die before it comes back to me."

Gail gasped and then shivered as she stared at the gaunt face and heard the strange words.

"You're crazy!" Tyler's voice was harsh with suppressed emotion. "Stop talking like that! Can't you see you're frightening Miss Dabney?"

The stranger stared at Gail as if really seeing her for the first time. "I beg your pardon, miss," he said with a bow. "I sometimes forget my manners, as I seem to have forgotten so many things. I remember now. The name is Smith—Shadow Smith—herald of death."

He bowed again, his dark eyes sweeping over the faces of the four men and the girl. Then he turned and started to walk away. He had only gone a few steps when he stopped and swung around.

"I see horsemen, their faces hidden as they ride through the night," he said. "There is blood on the moon."

He turned and moved swiftly but silently toward the door leading to the street and disappeared through it.

"Now I've seen everything," muttered Dismal. "And I'd just as leave stop looking."

"Who is he?" demanded Gail anxiously. "Where did he come from?"

"I've got a good idea where he came from," said Dismal. "But it isn't a place that's polite to name in front of a lady."

"He's a guest here," said the night clerk. "I gave him room twenty-six just before somebody knocked me out."

"Why bother about him?" Tyler snapped, a driving impatience in his tone that didn't seem quite natural under the circumstances. "The man is loco."

"Maybe," Solitaire said thoughtfully. He was reluctant to leave Gail, and yet he was so tired and sleepy that he could hardly keep awake. "If you folks will pardon me I think I'll turn in."

"Me, too," said Dismal with a yawn. "I'm plumb weary."

Both Solitaire and Dismal were peacefully sleeping when out from the black shadows of the massive canyons far to the western end of Pine Tree Valley came a band of silent horsemen. The pale starlight of a summer night gleamed down as they rode with horses closely bunched—at least forty tough, heavily armed men marked with the stamp of the owlhoot trails.

Down into the valley they came, traveling across stretches of wild rangeland and circling places where trees and brush were too thick, or where giant boulders blocked the path.

A tall masked man mounted on a powerful sorrel rode at the head of the cavalcade. When the band had traveled two miles he held up his hand in a signal to halt. The riders reined their horses to a stop as the leader wheeled his mount to face them.

"Tonight the Horseshoe Bunch returns," he said grimly. "Ten of you head for Deerhorn and wait for the signal, ten more of you split up and drift into Red Gulch. Pick your time and get busy."

"We'll do that, Boss," promised one of the men.
"But what are the rest of the boys going to be doing?"

"I'm taking most of them to the Triangle," said the outlaw leader. "Heard Norton has a herd rounded up and ready for a trail drive to Steam City, starting tomorrow morning. We're going to get them cattle." . He nodded at the man who had spoken. "I've got a special job for you, Ed Lang."

"What is it, Boss?" Lang urged his horse forward so that he was a little ahead of the others who waited, watched and listened. He was a small man with a hard face and a cruel restlessness about him. "Hope it's something interesting."

"You might make it so," the outlaw chief said dryly, and there was faint mockery in his deep voice. "I want you to down a couple of hombres, and I don't care how you do it."

"Name your men, Boss," Lang drawled casually.

"Solitaire Stevens and Dismal Day," said the outlaw leader, his voice growing hard. "You'll find 'em both in Deerhorn."

"Them, eh?" Lang's voice was no longer so casual, and the restlessness as he moved in his saddle was that of a man who felt the shadows of fear engulf him. "I ain't so sure I want to tangle with them jaspers. I haven't forgotten how that Solitaire hombre downed Hackett when Hack tried to kill Norton from that roof in town this morning. That Whistling Waddy is a salty gent."

"Afraid?" The cold contempt in the chief's voice carried to the others, and they were all watching Lang.

"Nope," Lang said, and his casual attitude seemed forced now. "I'll get them two if I can take my time about it."

"I'll give you forty-eight hours," said the boss. "All right, boys. Let's get moving."

Ten of the horsemen headed for Deerhorn, silent, sinister figures riding through the night. Another ten rode toward the town of Red Gulch, as quiet as had been the first group and equally dangerous. The rest headed for the Triangle spread. When they were nearing the ranch Ed Lang swung his horse away from the others.

"See you in forty-eight hours, if not sooner, Boss," he called back loudly over his shoulder so that they

all could hear him, braggadocio in his voice. "I'll tend to that little job for you."

He sent his horse galloping away and disappeared into the shadows of some trees. The rest rode on. In a few moments they, too, had vanished from view, leaving the stars still gleaming down on the rolling expanse of range country. . . .

On the Triangle range the nighthawk sang lustily as he circled the herd that had bedded down for the night. He did not see the shadowy figure that appeared in a patch of mesquite to his left. The starlight gleamed on the barrel of a rifle as the man in the shadows raised the Winchester to his shoulder and took careful aim. The rifle roared, and the nighthawk's song changed into a death cry as he slid limply out of the saddle.

Instantly horsemen loomed out of the darkness on all sides of the herd.

"Get that horse!" shouted the leader of the rustlers.
"If it heads back to the ranch, the outfit will know the nighthawk's run into trouble."

A rider dashed after the nighthawk's mount and caught the reins as he swung close. Other men started quietly working with the herd, urging the cattle into motion. So efficiently did they work that there was no danger of a stampede.

Soon they were heading toward the mountains at the western end of the huge valley. On beyond were the Border and the Rio Grande River. It would not be hard to dispose of the cattle in Mexico. Within half an hour the rustlers were gone, the herd with them. Pale starlight bathed the still figure of the nighthawk, and there was no sound save the mesquite rustling in a faint breeze.

CHAPTER VII

Two hours after the herd had been stolen from the Triangle range, Solitaire Stevens suddenly opened his eyes. He had been sleeping soundly, but something had awakened him. A feeling of uneasiness swept over him as he remained motionless in the bed in his hotel room, listening for the sound that had roused him from his slumber. To his ears came what sounded like the explosion of firecrackers some distance away. The noise came from the street in front of the hotel.

"That doesn't sound like drunken cowhands shooting off their guns regardless," muttered Solitaire. "Something has happened."

He had removed only his boots, gunbelts and hat when he had gone to bed. Now he rose, found the boots in the pale light that came in through the open window, and put them on. He did not bother to light the oil lamp beside the bed. He was just buckling on the gunbelts when he heard a soft knock on the locked door of his room. "Who is it?" he called as he went to the door.

"Me—Dismal," came a voice from the hall. "Let me in."

Solitaire unlocked the door and Dismal stepped into the room. He was fully dressed and wearing his gunbelt. He closed the door behind him.

"Hear all that gunfire?" he asked. "Sounds like somebody's shooting up the town. And we asked for a couple of rooms at the back of the hotel so it would be quiet."

"The shooting is coming from out front. Some time you'll have me believing you're as dumb as you think you are, Dismal." Solitaire went to the open window of his room and peered out. "Look here!"

Dismal came to the window. They could look along the rear of the buildings on the hotel side of the street. In back of the bank they spied a group of shadowy figures milling around in the starlight.

"Masked men," said Dismal softly. "Trying to get into the bank from the back. Some folks sure are eager to rob that bank. I reckon all they think about is money."

Solitaire had his guns in his hands, and he was whistling that strangely ominous little tune. Dismal sighed as he heard it.

Solitaire aimed at the legs of one of the masked men and his right-hand Colt roared. The bank robber dropped as a bullet plowed into his leg.

"Set 'em up in the other alley," said Dismal.

At once the other masked men realized the shot had come from above. Their guns roared and flamed as they fired at the second-floor windows of the hotel. Glass shattered and crashed.

"Gail isn't going to like them busting up her hotel that way," Dismal said, from where he had ducked down below the window sill. "And if there are other guests in the rooms at the back here they are going to be disconcerted, to say the most. Looks like you stirred up a nest of hornets, Solitaire."

"We've got to teach those hombres not to destroy other folks' property," said Solitaire. He was at the side of the window. "Get to stinging some of those hornets, Dismal."

His gun roared and a man dropped. A bullet from Dismal's gun downed another of the outlaws. The man who had been wounded in the leg had crawled away, and the others turned and ran, disappearing into the shadows and leaving two dead outlaws behind.

"Aw, they've gone," Dismal said sadly as he reloaded his gun. "And just when the party was getting interesting."

Solitaire dropped one Colt into the holster while he reloaded his other gun. "I guess the party is over," he drawled. "We better find out what it was all about."

Dismal struck a match and lighted the lamp. The two men cast long shadows on the wall as they walked toward the closed door. Dismal reached it first, but stopped short as someone knocked.

"Solitaire?" came Gail's voice. "Are you all right?"

Dismal opened the door. Gail stood there, her face pale in the dim light of the hall. Her hazel eyes swept anxiously over the two men as though to assure herself that they were not wounded. The acrid smell of gunsmoke drifted out through the open door.

Gail wore a green kimono over her white nightgown, and slippers.

"Everything is all right now, Gail," Solitaire said gently. "We spotted a bunch of masked men trying to get into the bank from the back, we fired at them and drove them away."

"I heard the gunfire; it woke me up," Gail said. "Masked men have been raiding the whole town." Her face clouded. "That strange man who calls himself Shadow Smith was right. He said he saw men riding through the night with their faces hidden, that there was blood on the moon."

"He sure guessed it," Dismal said softly. "Remind me to have that gent tell my fortune." Then he frowned as a thought struck him. "Never mind. On second thought I don't want that Smith hombre to tell me anything. He might say he sees a tall dark man ready to put a bullet in my back, and there are so many tall men in this town."

Gail smiled, but it was a bit forced, and it was obvious that she was worried.

"Good night. See you in the morning," she said. Then she went down the hall, opened the door of her room, stepped inside and closed it quietly behind her.

Solitaire stood staring at the closed door.

"I'd still like to find out what happened here in town tonight," Dismal said. "I'm just bursting with curiosity."

Solitaire turned to him with a smile. "Then let's go down and find out. Come on, Dismal."

In the lobby, Rockford, the night clerk, was behind the desk watching all the activity that went on around him. Men were bustling around the lobby, making it seem crowded.

Solitaire saw Reece Shadwell talking to Ward Barlow, the banker. A wounded man was lying on the couch, and a small, gray-bearded man was bandaging his shoulder.

"So this town has a doctor as well as an undertaker," said Dismal, as he and Solitaire reached the foot of the stairs and started across the lobby. "Wonder which one does the most business?"

"The undertaker, I guess," Solitaire said.

"They held up the saloon and robbed me of three hundred dollars," Shadwell said loudly. "Broke in just as I was closing up for the night."

"And some of them tried to get into the bank by the back door," announced Barlow. "Somebody killed two of them and drove them away from the bank. I wish I knew who did it."

"You can stop wishing right now, Mr. Barlow," said Dismal as he and Solitaire reached the two men. "I can't tell a lie when the truth will do just as well." He grinned. "Solitaire and I did it with our little six-guns."

"Splendid!" exclaimed the Deerhorn bank president, and his smile had all the warmth of a winter frost. "Again I am more than grateful to you gentlemen. This town owes you a debt that can never be repaid, but I shall try in my humble way at least to express my personal gratitude. While it is difficult for me to find the right words for this occasion—"

"Here we go again!" interrupted Shadwell impatiently, a scowl on his big fat face. "Can't you ever just talk instead of making speeches, Barlow?"

"I resent the way you interrupt and criticize me, Shadwell!" The light of the oil lamp burning in the hotel lobby gleamed down on Barlow's gray hair and the black clothing he wore. Anger gleamed in his eyes as he glared at the saloon keeper. "I can stand just so much of this attitude upon your part!"

Solitaire sensed that the antagonism between the two men was a swiftly growing thing that might lead to physical violence, and he decided to try and prevent it, at least for the time being.

"What happened out on the street?" Solitaire asked quietly. "We heard shooting out front when we were up in our rooms."

"Masked men—raiders," answered Shadwell, a worried expression on his big face. "Looks like the Horseshoe Bunch has come back, all right."

"What makes you think that?" demanded the bank president, the resentment no longer in his voice.

"Three of the masked riders who were shot and killed were carrying horseshoes that had been bent out straight," said Shadwell. "And that means something."

"Sure does," agreed Solitaire. "Sounds like Slash Lawson climbed out of his grave and has been just hanging around and twisting horseshoes out of shape ever since. Must have been kept right busy."

Shadwell frowned and glanced at Barlow as they caught the import of Solitaire's words. The saloon owner looked thoughtful, and the banker nodded.

"He's right, Shadwell," said Barlow. "There are getting to be too many twisted horseshoes."

"And that's likely to be plumb unlucky for somebody," said Dismal with a yawn. "I don't know about you, Solitaire, but I'm still sleepy and I'm going back to bed."

"Reckon I'll do the same," said Solitaire. He looked at Shadwell. "You might find out if the feller who calls himself Shadow Smith has strong hands, Reece."

Dismal had headed for the stairs, and Solitaire turned and followed him before Shadwell or Barlow could ask any questions.

CHAPTER VIII

It was nearly ten o'clock when Solitaire and Dismal came down into the lobby of the Palace Hotel the next morning, for both had slept soundly and late.

The bright sunlight of a warm summer day gleamed through the open windows of the lobby. It bathed Gail Dabney in a soft light as she stood behind the hotel desk. Her dark hair was neatly arranged, and she wore a blue dress with a white collar and cuffs.

"Morning, Solitaire, morning, Dismal," she said.
"I hope you finally got some sleep?"

"Morning, Gail," Solitaire said. "I sure did. Anything been happening that we haven't heard about yet, Gail?"

"The raiders were busy all over the valley last night," Gail said. "They stole a herd from the Triangle, and raided Red Gulch as well as Deerhorn."

"Sure are a busy bunch," said Dismal. "I'd like to know what Adam Norton thinks about what's going on."

"Just what I've been thinking," said Solitaire. "Reckon we'll take a little ride out to the Triangle after breakfast."

"You won't be welcome," said Gail. "Norton has been acting strangely lately, and doesn't welcome visitors."

"We'll try it anyway," Solitaire said. "Come on, Dismal. Let's eat." He smiled at the girl behind the counter, and his blue eyes were tender. "See you later, Gail."

"Of course, Solitaire."

As Solitaire and Dismal left the hotel they paid no attention to the hard-eyed, thin little man dressed in range clothes who stood on the plank walk. He did not even glance in their direction.

"So we head for the Triangle," remarked Dismal as they walked past the thin man. "That should be right interesting."

"Maybe," said Solitaire. "Anyway, the more we find out the better, I figure."

Ed Lang watched them until he saw them turn into a small eating place down the street to get their breakfast. He went to his horse, unfastened the reins from the hitching rail, swung into the saddle and rode slowly out of town. He didn't appear to be in any hurry to get where he was going. He was not, for he was remembering the orders the leader of the Horse-shoe Bunch had given him, and he had a job to do. . . .

When Solitaire and Dismal had finished their breakfast they headed for the livery stable. Old Sam Craig was sitting out front smoking a corncob pipe.

"We want to hire a couple of fresh horses, Sam," Solitaire said. "Got a little visiting to do, and aim to rest our mounts today."

"All right," said Craig languidly. "Take your pick."

They looked over the eight horses that were in the stalls beside their own roan and pinto, and decided there were only three of Craig's horses that were more than crow-bait. Solitaire picked a rangy bay, and Dismal selected a sorrel they considered the best of the lot. When they saddled up and rode out, Craig was still sitting in his chair.

"Have a nice time," he said. "From what I've heard, you two were right busy yesterday and last night and need a good vacation. If you don't come back it's all right with me. Your horses are better than mine."

"How do we get to the Triangle?" Solitaire asked.

"Follow the road south of town about five miles and you'll see a sign telling you that you're on Triangle property," said Craig. "Norton's outfit will probably shoot first and ask questions afterward. They're right touchy, and losing that herd last night won't make 'em much easier to get along with."

"Don't you bother your pretty little aching head about it, Sam," said Dismal. "Everybody loves us,

but they just don't know it."

When he and Solitaire rode out into the street Vance Rand had just swung away from the hitch-rail in front of the Flowing Cup Saloon. The owner of the Rolling R was mounted on a powerful-looking black horse. He headed toward the south end of the town and the road beyond, the black moving fast.

"He's riding like he's got something on his mind," said Dismal, watching the retreating horseman. "I hope it isn't us."

"Vance Rand isn't bothering about us unless he's a mind reader," Solitaire said as they rode on southward. He found the bay had a hard mouth and needed a firm hand on the reins. "He doesn't know we aim to ride to the Triangle."

"Never thought of that," said Dismal. "Feller told me once that my mind was an open book full of blank pages."

"Don't you pay any attention to flattery like that, Dismal," Solitaire said soothingly. "He was just trying to make you feel good."

Dismal snorted, and they rode on in silence. Soon they left the town behind them and followed a road with a stretch of woods to the left and rocky country to the right. Big boulders seemed to be guarding broods of smaller rocks. Vance Rand would be somewhere ahead of them along this road.

When they had ridden about two miles Solitaire glanced back. There was no one on the road behind

them, and the town was small in the hazy distance. The sun was bright and hot, and the dust of the road was soft beneath the hoofs of their horses.

"This road sure follows a straight line in all directions," remarked Dismal as they rounded a bend. "Reckon it kind of heads south at that, in a general way of speaking."

Solitaire wasn't paying any attention to his little partner. He was concentrating on some big boulders a few yards ahead. He caught a glimpse of something that gleamed for an instant in the sunlight.

"Duck!" he shouted, bending low in the saddle. "Look out, Dismal!"

A bullet made an angry sound as it whistled by just above his head. The roar of the rifle back among the rocks was low and heavy.

"Drygulcher!" yelled Dismal. "I'm getting out of here!"

He wheeled his horse in frantic haste, and rode low in the saddle as the sorrel galloped back along the road and around the bend to disappear from view.

The drygulcher fired again. Solitaire kicked his feet out of the stirrups, slid out of the saddle and hit the ground with a thud. He rolled over and kept rolling until he reached the shelter of a big boulder at the side of the road.

The bay didn't care for such unseemly action upon the part of his rider. He bucked, made a skittish turn, then went away from there, heading back toward the town and the livery stable.

For the third time the drygulcher fired. The bullet hit Solitaire's boulder, but he was well protected by the big rock. He listened to the report of the rifle with interest.

"That sure is a heavy gun," he muttered. "Judging by the sound, it's powerful enough to hunt elephants."

Solitaire drew his Colts, whistling that sinister little tune of his. The hot sun beat down on him. Again the rifle boomed. A bullet chipped off a piece of the rock. Solitaire did some calculating and decided that the range was too far for any accurate six-gun shooting, so the drygulcher appeared to have all the advantage.

That hombre seems to be spacing his shots right carefully, decided Solitaire, and for a moment he stopped whistling. Heavy gun, huh? A single-shot Sharps, I reckon. He noticed that one of the flattened slugs had bounced around the edge of the big rock. He put down one of his Colts and picked up the hunk of lead. Fifty-caliber bullet. That's a Sharps, all right.

The Sharps roared again, like the crack of a giant whip in the hot silence of the morning. The dry-gulcher was getting smart. He was aiming at a rock behind Solitaire's boulder, apparently hoping that a bullet might ricochet and hit the man he was trying to kill.

Solitaire edged around the rock and snapped a shot

from his right-hand Colt in the general direction of the drygulcher. From back among the rocks some distance away there came a startled yell.

Either this gun carries a lot further than I thought or Dismal has arrived, decided Solitaire. And I'm right sure it wasn't my bullet bothering that drygulcher.

He picked up his other gun, dropped it into the holster, then rose to his feet and listened. He heard a faint crashing in the brush below the rock where the drygulcher had crouched. Solitaire decided to risk going to see what was happening. He moved stealthily forward, reached the spot below the rock safely, then paused for an instant and watched what was going on with fascinated gaze.

Dismal was as busy as a beaver battling a thin, sandy-haired man. They were struggling on the ground. The drygulcher was trying to choke Dismal, and the little ranny was landing some solid punches to the man's face and body.

Solitaire slid forward and tapped the drygulcher neatly over the head with a gun barrel. The blow knocked the man unconscious just as Dismal landed a fist against his chin. Dismal struggled up, wriggling away from the limp form.

"Funny." Solitaire stared at the unconscious man. "I thought our drygulcher would be Vance Rand, but this man is a stranger."

"So are all the new Horseshoe Bunch, and the old

ones, too, far as we are concerned," said Dismal. "But that wouldn't stop 'em from downing us if they got the chance, I'll bet." He shook his head sadly. "Like I keep telling you, it's a wicked world, Solitaire."

It was quiet in the brush. The trail partners worked swiftly and silently, wasting no further time in conversation. Dismal drew the drygulcher's Colt out of the holster and thrust it into his own belt, while Solitaire went through the pockets of the unconscious man. He found nothing to identify the sandy-haired bushwacker, but he did draw out a metal bar that once had been a horseshoe.

"So he's a member of the club," said Dismal, staring at the twisted horseshoe.

"I don't think anybody twisted this out straight." Solitaire studied the iron rod in his hand. "Looks to me like it was heated and then pounded out straight on an anvil."

"Might be," agreed Dismal. "Ever since you mentioned it last night, I've been thinking of Lawson just doing nothing but twisting horseshoes straight with his hands. Seems a right useless way for a feller to spend his time."

"Whoever is bossing the Horseshoe Bunch doesn't strike me as a hombre who wastes much time," declared Solitaire, sticking the twisted horseshoe back into the drygulcher's pocket. "And I'm not sure he's Slash Lawson."

The man on the ground moaned and stirred as he

regained consciousness. Dismal looked at Solitaire and shook his head sadly.

"Just goes to show what happens when you send a man to do a boy's job," Dismal said. "You just gave him a love tap with that gun-barrel. I thought you really hit him."

"Time to get riding. Saddle up," muttered the man on the ground without opening his eyes. "Don't worry, Boss. You know me. Ed Lang always takes care of everything. I'll get them two hombres."

"Talks like he's haunted by his evil deeds," said Dismal in a shocked tone. "Maybe he's got a brainstorm, if he's got a brain."

"Huh?" Ed Lang sat up and glared at them. Then he grabbed at his empty holster. "Blast you, give me my gun!" he snapped.

"No," said Dismal firmly. "Can't let bad boys play with guns. You might hurt somebody, if you didn't get killed first."

"So your name is Lang," said Solitaire abruptly. "And the boss of the Twisted Horseshoe Bunch ordered you to drygulch us. Why?"

Ed Lang merely scowled at Solitaire. Dismal was studying the man's thin face and dark hard eyes. Finally Dismal shook his head.

"Knew he reminded me of something," he said.
"It was a rat I knew once. Of course me and the rat didn't have more than a boot throwing acquaintance, but Lang sure looks like that critter."

"You talk big now," Lang growled, getting to his feet and glaring at Dismal. "But I notice you sure high-tailed it when I fired that first shot."

"Sure," admitted Dismal. "He who fights and runs away will live to fight another day. Besides, you weren't very bright. You figured I was scared, but I just wanted a chance to circle and get you, and I did just that."

Solitaire heard the clatter of horses' hoofs on hard ground. He glanced in the direction of the sound, suddenly tense and wary. Two riders loomed into view as they circled a big boulder—a man and a girl. Solitaire relaxed as he recognized the man.

"We've got visitors," Solitaire said. "Buck Norton and a girl I've never seen before."

"What's the matter, Stevens?" Buck Norton called, looking at the trio with a puzzled frown on his good-looking face. He halted his horse near them, and the girl also reined her mount. "We heard shooting over this way a little while ago and decided to see what was wrong."

"This hombre was trying to drygulch us," answered Solitaire. "He appears to be a member of the Horseshoe Bunch."

"Then it's true!" exclaimed the girl. "They are riding again!"

"If folks keep on saying that," said Dismal dryly, "I'll begin to believe it myself."

CHAPTER IX

Lovely and blond and young, the girl with Buck Norton was so pretty that Solitaire stared at her in frank admiration.

"This is Nancy Young, whose father owns the Diamond Y outfit," Buck Norton said. "Nancy, I'd like you to meet Solitaire Stevens and Dismal Day."

Nancy smiled at Solitaire and Dismal as they tipped their hats to her. Dismal had moved back close to Ed Lang in case the drygulcher tried to get away.

Lang stood motionless, staring at the Sharps that was lying on the ground some distance away. His thin face was blank, but his eyes were hard, and there was nothing passive about his attitude.

"Solitaire Stevens is the Whistling Waddy, Nancy," Buck said. He looked at Lang. "I don't know this other feller."

"His name is Ed Lang," Solitaire said, conscious of the girl's blue eyes studying him intently. "As I said before, he was trying to drygulch us, but Dismal caught him. Now he's our prisoner. Reckon we'll

turn him over to Sheriff Gilford."

"These men are lying about me trying to drygulch 'em," Lang growled. "I work for Vance Rand on the Rolling R. Was bringing some money from the bank in town out to the boss when these two hombres grabbed me and robbed me."

Solitaire and Dismal looked at Lang in surprise, for the calm way he had told his story made it sound almost convincing.

"I've got to hand it to you, Lang," Dismal said in admiration. "When you start lying you sure do it good."

"He overdid it," Solitaire said. "He's carrying a twisted horseshoe in his pocket, and now he admits he works for Vance Rand. Looks like Rand must be tied up with the bunch that was doing the raiding in the valley last night and at the Diamond Y yesterday morning."

"Sounds like it all right," Buck Norton said soberly.
"I figure Dad would be right interested in questioning this hombre."

"So would my father," Nancy said. "He hasn't been convinced that the men who raided our ranch were actually the Horseshoe Bunch, but I think he may change his mind about that now."

"I was just bluffing," Lang said nervously. "I don't work for the Rolling R. I was lying, I tell you!"

"You sure were when you said we robbed you," snapped Dismal. "But I believe you are one of Rand's

men, all right."

"Bad guess!" called a hard voice from behind a big boulder a little distance away. "Don't make any foolish moves or the girl dies!"

Solitaire whirled in the direction of the voice. A man was crouched at the side of the rock, a Winchester in his hands aimed at Nancy Young. Only his eyes were visible between the brim of his Stetson and the dark neckerchief which hid the lower part of his face.

The warm day was suddenly filled with the tenseness of danger. Solitaire longed to grab for his guns, but he did not dare.

"Get moving, Lang," ordered the masked man. "Head for your horse. These folks won't try to stop you now."

Lang did not even linger to grab up the Sharps. He turned and ran. In a moment he was out of sight in the brush. Solitaire watched him go, a bitter sense of disappointment stealing over him. A bullet would have stopped Lang, but the three men had not dared risk it with that rifle menacing Nancy.

Buck suddenly spurred his horse forward, knowing that if the masked man fired now he would receive the bullet, and apparently not caring. In an instant Buck and his horse were in front of the girl on the mare, protecting her from the man behind the rocks.

Relief swept over Solitaire as he saw that Nancy was safe. His hand flashed to his gun on his right hip. The

Colt roared as it came up, but he was a second too late. The masked man had dodged behind the rock.

"Get him!" shouted Dismal, his own gun drawn. "He's not far away!"

They headed for the big boulder. Solitaire went to the left and Dismal to the right as they circled around the big rock, but there were a number of boulders scattered behind the first one and the brush was thick. The masked man had silently disappeared.

"Gone!" muttered Dismal disgustedly. "And there's not much chance of finding him now. He sure moves fast. Wonder who he was anyway?"

"Don't know," Solitaire said thoughtfully. "His voice sounded kind of familiar. Might have been Vance Rand. Look over there to the north, Dismal."

Dismal glanced in the direction indicated and saw a rider galloping away in the distance. The horseman looked like Ed Lang.

"Guess all the masked man wanted was to make sure Lang got away," said Solitaire. "If he hadn't, he would sure have downed us both."

They decided there was no use searching further for the masked men, and returned to where Buck and Nancy sat in their saddles waiting for them.

"He got away," Solitaire said unnecessarily.

"I'll get my horse," said Dismal. "When last seen yours was heading for the livery stable back in Deerhorn, Solitaire." The little ranny shook his head sadly. "I feel plumb sorry for you. It's going to be a long

walk back to town."

Dismal swiftly got the horse he had left hidden in the wild country beyond the rocks. He rode back to where Solitaire stood and halted his mount.

"Guess I'll have to break down and see if this crowbait will carry double, Solitaire," he said. "'Course the poor animal will probably be sway-backed for the rest of his life, but when I get to thinking of you walking all the way back to town it makes me want to burst right out crying."

"Save your grief," said Solitaire, as he mounted behind Dismay. "I just couldn't stand it."

Buck and Nancy glanced at each other and smiled.

They rode out to the road, with Buck and Nancy in the lead and Solitaire and Dismal following on the sorrel. Just as they reached the road a band of horsemen appeared, coming from the direction of the town at a good clip. Sheriff Gilford was in the lead, with Adam Norton on the lawman's left, and Mark Lucan, Norton's bodyguard, on the right. Behind them rode three other men, one of them leading a riderless bay horse. It was the horse Solitaire had hired at the livery stable.

"What happened, Solitaire?" demanded the sheriff as he reined up and the other riders also halted. "Sam Craig was sure something was wrong when this horse came back without a rider and headed straight for the stable."

"I don't care what happened!" snapped Adam Nor-

ton, glaring at Buck and the girl. "What's my son doing with Nancy Young? Buck, I thought I told you I didn't want you to have anything to do with Tom Young or his daughter!"

Buck faced his father defiantly, and yet there was a puzzled expression on his good-looking young face, as if he could not believe Adam Norton could speak as he had just done.

It was Nancy who broke the silence. Her head was held proudly and her blue eyes gazed at Norton fearlessly.

"Really, Mr. Norton," she said coldly, "don't you think you are acting silly and unreasonable? Up to a month ago I thought that you and my father were good friends, but you have changed. I don't understand why."

She wheeled and started to ride away. Adam Norton frowned as he watched her.

"Wait, Nancy!" he called, his voice suddenly growing almost pleading. "I guess I—"

"Let her go, boss," interrupted Lucan sharply.

"All right." Norton glanced at his foreman and was silent.

Buck started to follow the girl, then hesitated and wheeled his horse around. His young, good-looking face was bitter as he again joined the others.

"So Lucan gives the orders on the Triangle now," said the sheriff as Nancy rode swiftly across the rangeland beyond the road without looking back.

Mark Lucan glared at Gilford, looking more like a dangerous old wolf than ever. His right hand was close to his gun.

"You talk too much, Gilford," he said, his voice harsh.

"That's what I like about folks in this part of the country," Dismal said cheerfully. "Just one big happy family." He grinned. "Seeing as you brought Solitaire's horse back here, Sheriff, you mind if he rides him? I just rented this nag from Craig. I don't want to have to buy him."

"Sure." Gilford turned to one of the men with him. "Give Stevens that bay, Joe."

Solitaire slid off Dismal's sorrel and took the reins of the bay as the man called Joe led the horse up. Norton said something to Buck in a low tone. The three Triangle men were a little distance from the others. Buck frowned, then rode away with his father and the foreman. They did not look back as they headed across the rangeland in the opposite direction from that which Nancy Young had taken.

"Sure is a proddy outfit," muttered Sheriff Gilford as he watched the three departing riders. He turned to Solitaire, who had mounted and ridden up beside him. "How did you come to lose your horse?"

"Feller named Ed Lang tried to drygulch us," said Solitaire. "My horse got away, but Dismal circled around and captured Lang. Then Buck and Nancy showed up."

He told of the masked man who had given Lang a chance to get away. Sheriff Gilford listened with interest, as did the three men with him.

"These are my deputies. They've been out scouting around the valley and just got back to town this morning," said the sheriff when Solitaire had finished. "Joe Drake, Zack Lance and Irvin Grant."

Solitaire studied the three men. They looked like salty hombres who would be handy at siding a man in a gun battle.

"You ever heard of this Ed Lang I've been telling you about, Sheriff?" Solitaire asked.

"Ed Lang?" Gilford thought a moment, then shook his head. "Don't remember the name." He picked up his reins. "We better be getting back to town. You coming with us?"

"We'll be riding in by evening," said Solitaire.
"Figured we'd stop at some of the ranches and see if
we could get a riding job."

"With all the trouble in the valley, some of the outfits should be interested in taking on a couple of men who are handy with guns like you two," said the sheriff. "See you later, then."

"Thanks for bringing me my horse," Solitaire said.

Matt Gilford nodded and rode away with his three deputies, heading back along the road toward the town.

The trail partners rode on along the road in the opposite direction for three miles. Then the stretch

of wild rocky country gave way to rolling rangeland. The sun was high in the sky, and Solitaire decided it was about noon.

"We've got some jerky in our saddle-rolls," he said.
"Reckon we might stop long enough to eat."

They rode across the range away from the road, and found a spot in the shade of a huge oak tree. They dismounted and ground-hitched the horses. Solitaire unfastened his saddle-roll and looked for the dried meat called jerky. He grunted as he drew out a small package wrapped in oilskin.

"What's that?" asked Dismal. "Somebody give you a present?"

"Don't know. This wasn't in my saddle-roll the last time I fastened it up." Solitaire unwrapped the package. For an instant he gazed blankly at a neat stack of hundred-dollar bills. "Agitated kitten cats!"

"Looks like you've been holding out on me," Dismal said sadly. "Here you're a millionaire and never told me."

Solitaire didn't pay any attention. He was busy counting the money.

"Five hundred dollars," he said when he had finished. "And all in nice new bills that look like they just came from some bank." A piece of white paper that had also been in the oilskin fluttered to the ground. "What's that?"

Dismal picked up the paper and read the words scrawled on it in pencil. He passed it over to Soli-

taire, who read:

Dear Boss:

Me and the boys are all ready for the raids on the towns tonight just like you ordered. The Horseshoe Bunch will really get riding.

Ed.

"Nice," said Solitaire, his voice hard. "And if the sheriff was to find that note and the money in my saddle-roll, he'd be sure I was the leader of the Horse-shoe Bunch."

"Looks like somebody figures it's worth five hundred dollars just to frame us," said Dismal. "All of a sudden we're right valuable folks, and I never felt so self-conscious about being rich!"

CHAPTER TEN

The jerky didn't take long to eat, and both men soon finished their light lunch. Solitaire got to his feet as he spied something on the far side of the tree. He circled around and stood gazing at a frayed and weather-beaten length of rope that dangled from a stout branch. Dismal thrust the note into a pocket of his levis as he followed Solitaire. He saw the rope, and nodded toward a mound of dirt and rocks a short distance away.

"Looks like somebody was hung from that limb and buried over there," Dismal said. "Wonder if this was where they brought Slash Lawson that night last fall?"

"Reckon it must be. We haven't heard any talk about anyone but Lawson having been strung up," said Solitaire. "The end of the rope has been cut. Somebody must have cut him down and buried him."

Dismal walked over to the grave, with Solitaire close behind him. They looked at each other and frowned when they noticed a spot where the dirt and rocks had been stirred up as if someone or something

had crawled out of the grave.

"Kind of gives me the shivers," said Dismal. "Looks like it happened months ago, maybe last fall or winter."

"Seems so," Solitaire said.

He glanced down as his boot toe touched something that rolled. He reached down and picked up the copper casing of a .45-caliber shell that looked as if it had been through a lot of weather.

"Somebody got shot, looks like," he said, as he examined the cartridge case. "Happened a long time ago, too, also maybe last fall."

"Don't look now, but we've got company," Dismal said, staring at something behind Solitaire.

Solitaire whirled. Despite the bright sunlight of the warm summer day, a feeling of uneasiness stole over him as he saw the tall, gaunt, gray-haired man who called himself Shadow Smith standing a short distance away.

There was something weird and uncanny about the gaunt gray man. His strange dark eyes stared blankly ahead of him, and he seemed lost in a world of his own.

"It was dark; I couldn't breathe," Smith murmured to himself. "My chest and my leg hurt from the bullets, but I was digging, digging, trying to get the dirt away. Then it was gone and I could breathe again. I felt the wind against my face—the wind and the rain."

Dismal coughed nervously. Smith swung around, his hands flashing to the white-handled Colts in his holsters, but Solitaire's draw was faster. Instantly he was covering the gray man with his guns.

"I wouldn't try it, Smith," he said coldly. "Leave your guns alone."

Smith stared at Solitaire and Dismal as if really seeing them for the first time, and he seemed dazed and uncertain now. He let the ivory-handled guns drop back into the holsters.

Turning abruptly, he walked away, circling around a big rock and disappearing. The two trail partners glanced at each other, and Solitaire shook his head.

"Don't try to stop him," Solitaire said. "Let him go. I've got an idea that as long as Shadow Smith is free to roam around, the leader of this new Horseshoe Bunch isn't any too safe."

"Why?" asked Dismal.

"Because Smith just might be this Slash Lawson who really has come back from the grave," said Solitaire.

Dismal stared at him in amazement. "How do you figure that?"

"I'm not sure about it," said Solitaire. "But I am certain about something else. Nobody is ever going to find that five hundred dollars on us."

"Don't tell me you're going to cast five hundred dollars to the winds?" demanded Dismal, as he followed Solitaire back around the tree to the spot where they had left the money. "I can't think of a breeze that ever did a thing for me." His tone grew anxious. "Say it isn't so!"

"It isn't so. We're going to bury the money where we can find it right easy. Come on, Dismal."

Solitaire picked up the money and led the way to a small clump of trees some distance from the big oak. He found a spot hidden back among the trees, drew a clasp knife out of a pocket of his levis and dug a hole in the ground with the big blade. He buried the money wrapped in the oilskin in the ground and covered it carefully, then tramped the dirt down with his foot so the spot would not be noticed.

"You reckon we better say some fitting words over this burial?" asked Dismal.

"After hearing Shadow Smith I'd rather not talk about burials," said Solitaire. "Let's get riding."

They got their horses and rode back to the road.

A horseman was coming swiftly from the direction of Deerhorn, as if he had some important business on his mind. They halted their horses and sat in the saddles waiting at the side of the road as he approached.

Sheriff Gilford rode up and reined his mount near the two men. He tried to assume a casual attitude, but Solitaire sensed that the lawman was wary, even a bit nervous, and he wondered why.

"Was going to ride out to the Triangle and see if I

could find you there," Gilford said. "Ward Barlow wants to see you at the bank about something important."

"Probably wants to give us a big reward for driving those masked men away from the bank last night," said Dismal, and he winked at Solitaire. "Leastwise I'm sure he wants to talk about money."

"Then you'll come back to town with me?" asked Gilford, relief in his voice.

"Sure, Sheriff," Solitaire said quietly. "We aim to do just that. Let's go."

Solitaire felt the old feeling of uneasiness stealing over him as they rode into town and halted their horses in front of the Deerhorn Bank. Ward Barlow came out of the bank to the plank walk, frowning at the three men. He looked more like an undertaker than ever in his dark clothes, with the afternoon sunlight gleaming on his gray hair.

"Glad to see you brought them in without any trouble, Sheriff," he said. "I was afraid that they might put up a fight."

Gilford's three deputies came out of the bank behind Barlow, silent, salty-looking men. They moved over and stood close to the sheriff as Gilford, Solitaire and Dismal dismounted and tied their reins to a hitch-rail.

Solitaire's eyes narrowed as he glanced at Dismal. The little ranny was frowning, for both of them sensed danger in the grim attitude of the men around

them.

"We rode right into it with our eyes open," Dismal said.

"What's the idea, Barlow?" demanded Solitaire coldly. "We came back to the town with the sheriff because he said you wanted to see us about something important."

"Oh, he did!" Barlow's smile was like a crack in a piece of old parchment. "That was clever of you, Sheriff, to bring them right into town without telling them they are under arrest."

"They aren't under arrest yet," said Gilford in his dry voice. "You said you had some evidence that would prove they're part of the bank robber outfit and the Horseshoe Bunch. When you prove it I'll arrest them, Barlow."

"You surprise me, Sheriff," Solitaire said quietly. "You sound like an honest man, or maybe I just imagine it."

"Search them, Sheriff," ordered Barlow impatiently. "I've been informed that these two are the leaders of the Horseshoe Bunch, and they are carrying some of the money they got from the Red Gulch bank holdup a few days ago."

"Suppose we should be carrying some cash," said Solitaire. "How are you going to prove it came from the Red Gulch bank, Barlow?"

"By the serial numbers of the bills." The banker drew a paper out of a pocket of his black coat. "I received a list of those numbers from the Red Gulch bank this morning."

Vance Rand came out of the Flowing Cup Saloon, and Reece Shadwell was with him. The two men strolled across the street to see what was going on in front of the bank.

Dismal thrust a hand into a pocket of his levis. He gasped as his fingers encountered a crumpled bit of paper—the note Solitaire had found with the money in his saddle-roll.

"All right, boys," Gilford said to the deputies.
"Take a look through their saddle-rolls and see if you find anything suspicious."

Promptly the three deputies set to work searching the saddle-rolls on the horses that Solitaire and Dismal had tied to the rail. The lawmen found nothing of interest. Ward Barlow scowled.

"Nothing?" he demanded. "No money? But I was told—" He broke off.

"What's the idea?" asked Reece Shadwell curiously as he and Vance Rand stood watching. "Why all this searching of the saddle-rolls, Barlow?"

"Because I've been told these men are the leaders of the Horseshoe Bunch and are carrying evidence on them that will prove it," said Barlow.

"Leaders of the Horseshoe Bunch!" exclaimed the stout saloon owner in astonishment. "Who the devil told you that?"

"Never mind," Barlow snapped. "Go through their

clothes, Sheriff."

"Sorry, Stevens."

Gilford stepped up and went through Solitaire's pockets. The sheriff found a small roll of bills, then drew out a twisted horseshoe. It was the one Solitaire had found besides the body of Lem King in the hotel room. He had placed it in his pocket and forgotten it.

"Here's one of them twisted horseshoes," the sheriff said. "You're carrying that doesn't look so good, Stevens."

"It looks awful to me," muttered Dismal. "Would you gents mind if I left you and came back a month from Sunday?"

After handing the twisted horseshoe to one of his deputies, Gilford stepped over to the little cowboy. Dismal sighed and stood motionless as the sheriff went through his pockets. The lawman drew out the note, unfolded it and read it.

"What is it, Matt?" asked Shadwell, seeing the sheriff's frown.

"A note," said Gilford. "It reads, 'Me and the boys are all ready for the raids on the towns tonight just like you ordered. The Horseshoe Bunch will really get riding. Ed."

"I knew it!" exclaimed Barlow. "They are the leaders of the Horseshoe Bunch."

"Sounds that way." Shadwell shook his head and there was a frown on his big moon-like face as he stared at Solitaire and Dismal. "I can't hardly believe it. It sure doesn't tie up with what I've heard about the Whistling Waddy."

"Afraid I'll have to place you two under arrest until I learn the right of this," Sheriff Gilford said in a resigned tone. "Take 'em down to the jail, boys."

Dismal glanced at Solitaire, seeking a signal to go into action. They were outnumbered, but these two had fought their way out of tighter spots than this. Solitaire shook his head. Any gunplay now would only make these men more certain than ever that their captives actually were the leaders of the Horseshoe Bunch.

"Guess we'd better trail along like little lambs, Dismal," Solitaire said. "Will somebody please take those horses back to Sam Craig at the livery stable? They belong to him. Dismal and I just rented them for this morning—I mean for the day."

"I'll tend to that," Shadwell said. "Glad to do it." "Thanks," Solitaire said.

CHAPTER XI

Night sounds came dimly through the barred window of the cell in the Deerhorn Jail. The stamping of horses at a hitching rail, footsteps on the plank walks, voices and occasionally the jingle of spurs.

Solitaire sat on the edge of a bunk smoking a cigarette. Dismal was amusing himself, as he had been doing for the past hour, reading the names and messages the former occupants of the cell had scrawled on the walls.

Suddenly the door at the front of the corridor opened, and Deputy Irvin Grant appeared, followed by Reece Shadwell.

"They're arresting you, too, I hope, Shadwell," Dismal called as he watched the two men approach. "Sure is lonely in this jail with just us two prisoners."

"Nothing like that." Shadwell chuckled as he came closer. "Just figured I'd pay you hombres a little visit." He stopped at the cell door and glanced at the deputy. "I'd like to talk to these men privately, if you don't mind, Grant."

"All right with me, Shadwell." The deputy started back along the corridor. "I'll get back to the poker game in the sheriff's office."

Solitaire rose from the bunk and moved to the door beside Dismal. He watched Grant go through the door to the sheriff's office and close it behind him.

"Either the deputy is a trusting soul, or you know where the body is buried, Reece," Solitaire said.

"Grant knows I can be trusted," said Shadwell.

"But Gilford is a fool. He should have more sense than to believe you two are the leaders of the Horse-shoe Bunch."

"Just what we kept telling them, but nobody listened," said Dismal.

"Now you're in a bad spot," said Shadwell, moving closer and lowering his voice. "You've got to get out of here tonight if you want to stay alive!"

"Why?" demanded Solitaire.

"Because Barlow and Ace Tyler are stirring up the town against you," said Shadwell, and the stout man really sounded anxious for the safety of the two prisoners. "They're buying drinks and getting the men all set for a lynching."

"You're sure Barlow and Tyler are stirring up trouble, Reece?" Solitaire asked.

"Of course I'm sure of it," Shadwell said impatiently. "They claim you are the leaders of the Horseshoe Bunch, and a lot of folks are beginning to believe them." The Saloon owner thrust a Colt through

the bars, butt first. "Here—take this gun. It's loaded. Use it to get away after I leave. Get out as soon as you can. Work fast if you want to keep on living."

"Thanks," Solitaire said dryly, and took the gun. "Funny you should be so anxious to help us, Reece. Didn't know that we had any friends in this town."

"You never know who your friends are till you're in bad trouble," Shadwell said quietly. "Get out of here fast. I'm leaving now."

He turned away, massive in the light from the corridor. His shadow loomed huge against the wall, then grew smaller and faded away as he walked on toward the sheriff's office.

Solitaire glanced at Dismal, then stepped back and sat down on the bunk. Both men were still wearing their cartridge belts, but the sheriff had taken their guns. Solitaire examined the gun Shadwell had given him. The brass ends of the cartridges gleamed faintly in the light as he looked at the cylinder.

"Santa Claus in July," muttered Dismal as he dropped down on the bunk across from Solitaire. "It don't seem natural."

Solitaire did not say anything. He was whistling softly and musically as he took the cartridges out of the gun. The tune was "After The Ball."

There were tiny scratches on the brass cartridge cases where the bullets fitted into them. Solitaire looked closely, then handed one of the cartridges to Dismal.

"Somebody has been right industrious," Solitaire said as he stopped whistling. "I figure there's mighty little powder in those shells."

"And I think the same thing," agreed Dismal as he examined the cartridge. "Just about like trying to shoot somebody with an empty gun. And Shadwell says, 'You never know your friends till you're in bad trouble.' Ain't it the truth, Solitaire!"

Solitaire calmly removed the rest of the cartridges from the gun and replaced them with bullets from his own belt. He thrust the Colt into the empty holster on his right leg.

"I'm hungry," he said. "Time they brought us some supper. When they do, we'll leave."

"That'll be nice," Dismal said dryly. "And do we kiss Gilford and the deputies goodbye, or just steal silently out into the night?"

After a long wait Matt Gilford appeared, carrying a tray with a napkin over it.

"Brought your supper," Gilford said as he came to the cell. "Got it from the hotel. They had fried chicken tonight, so I brought you some of that along with the fixings."

Dismal looked at Solitaire, sighed, and shook his head sadly. "When I get to thinking about it, him being so kind and all, it nearly breaks my heart," Dismal said. "It just doesn't seem right."

The sheriff held the tray in his left hand while he drew out a bunch of keys with his right and unlocked

the cell door. Solitaire and Dismal remained seated on the bunks as Gilford stepped inside. A blanket beside him hid the gun in Solitaire's holster. The sheriff put the tray down on the end of the bunk.

The trail partners began to eat their dinner, and it was good. The sheriff had even brought them coffee and apple pie for desert. Gilford dropped down on the opposite bunk and sat watching his two prisoners.

"I've been wondering while we've been eating, Matt," said Dismal as he finished the last bite of pie. "Have you got a hard head?"

"Huh?" the sheriff looked at Dismal, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing," said Dismal, suddenly realizing he had said too much. "I was just thinking out loud. They do say that I'm the loudest thinker they ever ran across."

"You're loco!" Gilford got to his feet and picked up the tray. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Swiftly and silently Solitaire got to his feet as the sheriff moved toward the door. The gun flashed out of the holster.

"Sorry, Sheriff." Solitaire thrust the muzzle of the Colt against Gilford's back. "It's loaded, so don't try anything foolish."

Motionless, the sheriff stood there with the tray in one hand and the keys in the other. Dismal stepped forward and lifted Gilford's .45 out of the holster. He tried the balance of the Colt and nodded.

"Nice gun, Matt," he said.

Solitaire was puzzled. In his estimation the sheriff was taking the whole thing too calmly. It wasn't natural. All Gilford had to do was shout for help and his three deputies would come rushing into the corridor with guns drawn, ready for trouble.

"You're making a mistake, Solitaire," Gilford said quietly. "You'd be safer in jail than you would out there."

"Maybe," said Dismal. "But me and Solitaire are tired of being a couple of birds in a gilded cage."

He took the tray away from the sheriff, and the keys, then swiftly bound and gagged the lawman, using Gilford's trouser belt and neckerchief. Gilford made no attempt to struggle. Solitaire and Dismal left the sheriff and hurried out of the cell, locking the door behind them.

"Get moving, Dismal," whispered Solitaire. "Out the back door before any of the deputies show up."

They tiptoed down the corridor with guns ready. Reaching the rear door, Solitaire drew back the bolt and opened it. A cool breeze swept in, and he saw that the night was dark and shadowy. Clouds hid the moon and stars, and there was a hint of rain in the air.

"Careful, Dismal," Solitaire said softly. "There's something about this I don't like. It's been too easy."

"Just what I figure," Dismal whispered. "But we better keep going."

They stepped outside. Solitaire moved away from the door, with Dismal close behind him. Then from the shadows came a sudden blast of gunfire. Solitaire felt as though a red-hot poker had been drawn across his left arm and knew that a bullet had creased it.

To his left he had seen the flash of flame, and now he saw a shadowy figure move. His gun roared, and Dismal also triggered his Colt.

A man howled in pain and fell heavily, to sprawl motionless in the shadows. There was the pounding of running feet, then silence. The acrid smell of gunpowder mingled with the scent of rain in the air.

"Our guns weren't supposed to be loaded," Dismal said grimly, swiftly reloading his Colt as he spoke. "Don't believe there was more than two of those hombres who tried to get us."

"And we got one of 'em," Solitaire said as he also reloaded his gun. He glanced back through the open jail door. At the far end of the corridor the three deputies had appeared, guns in their hands. "Let's get out of here. Run, Dismal!"

They raced along the rear of the buildings, clinging to the shadows. When they were some distance from the jail, they found there was no sign of pursuit. They slowed down to get their breath.

"Head for the livery stable," said Solitaire. "We've got to get our horses and get out of town."

"You talk and I'll pant," said Dismal. "I'm still out of breath."

They rested for a few minutes, then moved on slowly and quietly. Finally they reached the back of the livery stable, which loomed large in the shadows. A rear door stood half-open, a dim streak of yellow light showing through the opening.

Solitaire slipped in through the door, his hand on the butt of the gun in his holster. Dismal followed close behind him. The scent of horses and hay, grain and leather was strong. An oil lantern was burning, hung on a post near the stalls.

"Looking for something special?"

It was Sam Craig who spoke as he stepped out of the shadows with a scatter-gun covering the two men.

"I just knew our happiness couldn't last, Solitaire," said Dismal sadly.

Solitaire stared at the old stable keeper, conscious of the glitter in Craig's eyes, the way he held the shotgun ready to shoot. Then Craig seemed to relax. He lowered the gun a little.

"Shadwell brought my horses back," he said casually. "And you owe me two dollars apiece for the rent of those nags. Should charge you more for working the bay so hard."

"You'll get it, Sam," Solitaire said. "We're in trouble. We just escaped from the jail."

"And from being killed by some gents who were waiting outside for us," said Dismal. "Put that gun down, Sam. It makes me nervous."

Sam Craig lowered the shotgun, then placed it

against the wall. Dismal uttered a sigh of relief. Solitaire no longer held his hand close to the butt of the Colt. He reached into a pocket of his levis, drew out the small roll of bills that the lawmen had returned to him, peeled off four ones and handed them to the stable owner.

"Gilford and his deputies will be looking for you." Craig said as he thrust the money into his pocket. "Don't blame you for leaving the jail. It ain't much of a place. I found that out when the sheriff had me in there once for being drunk and disorderly."

Solitaire was suddenly conscious of danger. It was the instinctive feeling of a man who lived by the rule of the six-gun. Outside the open back door of the livery stable, he heard the faint click of a cocked hammer.

He whirled, right hand flashing to his Colt. He ducked and weaved as he fired. The sound of his gun and that of the man outside blended into a single roar. A bullet whistled by Solitaire's head and thudded into a post, knocking a hackamore to the floor. Dismal's Colt flashed up, and the stablekeeper reached for the shotgun.

A man staggered in through the door. Blood stained his fingers as he clutched at his chest with both hands. He had dropped his gun and was cursing steadily.

"Ed Lang!" exclaimed Dismal, as he stared at the thin, pain-distorted face revealed in the lantern light. 'Knew if you kept on trying to down us you'd get hurt."

Solitaire stood motionless, silently watching Lang. His gun was heavy in his hand, and he dropped it back into the holster. He felt weary, and sorry for Ed Lang, for he could see that the thin-faced outlaw was badly wounded.

Lang's hands were red with blood now. He was still cursing, but his voice was weaker. He staggered over to a bale of hay and sat down weakly.

"Looks like I'm about finished," he muttered. "The boss gave me forty-eight hours to get you and Dismal, Solitaire. I didn't like the idea much, but I said I'd do it."

"Who is the boss?" Solitaire asked.

"Don't know—wears a mask," murmured Lang. He shivered and closed his eyes. "Getting awful dark. Got folks in Wyoming. Mebbe—"

"Mebbe what?" Solitaire asked.

Lang opened his eyes and looked at Solitaire, then trembled and closed them again.

"Mebbe you'll tell my folks I was working for some outfit when I cashed in, not that I was riding with the Horseshoe Bunch. They live in Laramie, and the old man is John Lang. Will you tell the folks, Solitaire?"

"I'll tell them, Ed," Solitaire said gently. "You can be sure of that."

"Thanks, I-"

Ed Lang shivered again, then grew still. He slid limply off the bale of hay, to sprawl on the floor.

"There aren't many men who are all bad," Dismal

said slowly as he stared at the still figure.

"Somebody might have heard the shooting," Sam Craig said. "You jaspers better get out of here, pronto."

"Something to that," agreed Solitaire. "Let's get moving, Dismal."

They got their rigging and quickly saddled their own horses.

"So long, Sam," Dismal said. "We'll be seeing you."

"Unhuh," said Craig. "But I hope not. Don't stay around this part of the country on my account. I'd sure enjoy missing you both."

CHAPTER XII

The trail partners rode away, heading straight across the rangeland behind the town. They rode on at a slower pace.

"Where are we going?" Dismal asked.

"Figure on paying Adam Norton a visit," Solitaire said.

"Good thing Craig told us how to reach the Triangle when we first started for the ranch today," said Dismal. "Since we've never been there, even in daylight, finding the spread on a night like this would be the same as looking for a needle in a haystack."

Solitaire started softly whistling, "The Old Oaken Bucket." Dismal sighed and rode on in silence for a mile or so. Solitaire continued his musical efforts for a time, then ceased whistling.

"The silence sure is deafening," Dismal said. He glanced ahead along the road over which they were now traveling. "There's a gate; looks like we've reached the Triangle."

Solitaire noticed trees at the left of the gate, and

the shadows beneath the branches were deep and dark. Once more a feeling of uneasiness stole over him, and he kept his right hand close to his gun while his left held the pinto's reins. As Solitaire and Dismal drew closer to the gate two men stepped out of the shadows with rifles in their hands.

"What do you hombres want?" one of the guards demanded curtly.

"This the Triangle?" asked Solitaire.

"It is," said the guard.

"Then we want to see Adam Norton," Solitaire said.

"The boss don't want any visitors," growled the guard.

"He wants to see us," Solitaire said firmly. "We've got something important to tell him."

"Maybe we better take 'em to the boss," suggested the second guard. I'll get our horses."

He stepped back into the shadows and reappeared in a few moments leading two horses by the reins. The two guards thrust their rifles into their saddle-boots and mounted. One rode ahead, leading the way through the open gate. The other man rode behind Solitaire and Dismal. They both knew they were risking a shot in the back, but they took a chance on it.

For what must have been two or three miles the four men rode in silence. Then the buildings of a big ranch loomed ahead. Lights shone through the

windows of the ranchhouse. Behind it and some distance away were the bunkhouse, a big stable, a cook shack and a few other smaller buildings. Off to the right was the cavvy corral.

"The Triangle sure seems a right big outfit," said Dismal as he looked around with interest. "Guess Buck Norton wasn't boasting too much when he said it was the biggest spread around here."

On the ranchhouse porch, chairs and table loomed ghost-like in the light from the windows. The guard who had led the two strangers there swung out of the saddle, dropping his reins. Solitaire halted his pinto and Dismal reined his roan. There rear guard sat his saddle watching.

"Wait here," the first guard said. "I'll ask Norton if he wants to see you. You didn't tell me your names?"

"You didn't tell us yours either," grumbled Dismal. "We've been feeling right hurt about that. I'm Dismal Day and this here tall drink of water is Solitaire Stevens."

The guard nodded. His spurs jingled as he went up the steps, across the porch and into the house through the open front door.

He was gone a long time. Solitaire was growing restless and Dismal was strangely silent when finally the guard reappeared on the porch.

"Boss says to bring 'em in, Denver," he called to the other guard. "All right, Waco," said Denver.

"His name is Waco." Dismal nodded to the man on the porch and swung out of the saddle. "The other one is named Denver."

"You're Smart, Dismal." Solitaire dismounted and tied the reins of the pinto to a hitch-rail, as Dismal was doing with the roan.

Denver dismounted, ground-hitching his horse, and followed Solitaire and Dismal up the steps. Waco went back into the house. Solitaire walked inside, with Dismal close behind him.

They found themselves in a long hall that ran the length of the ranchhouse. There were doors on either side of the hall, and a carpet-covered flight of stairs rose to the second floor. Waco stopped before a closed door and knocked.

"If you hear a sound like a lion roaring, that's Norton," said Dismal softly.

From behind the closed door came a shout. Solitaire and Dismal looked at each other and grinned. Waco opened the door and motioned the two men into a big living room that was comfortably and expensively furnished. There was a piano, big chairs, and two sofas, with a mahogany table in the center of the room. An ornate oil lamp burned on the table.

Adam Norton sat in one of the deep chairs, smoking a cigar and glaring at them. He looked like an old gray hawk.

"Well?" he demanded curtly.

Solitaire turned deliberately and looked at the two guards who stood in the doorway listening. He glanced meaningly at Norton.

"All right, boys," Norton said. "You can go now. Better get back to guarding the gate."

Waco and Denver turned away.

"We're alone now," Norton said. "What did you want to see me about?"

"You own the biggest spread around here," Solitaire went on, "So you should be the boss of the cattlemen in the valley, Norton."

"I am," snapped Norton. "What are you driving at, Stevens?"

"The Horseshoe Bunch stole some of your cattle and raided two towns in the valley last night," said Solitaire. "And you ranchers are doing nothing about it." There was a scornful light in his blue eyes, impatience in the strong face. "You're shivering in your boots because you think a dead man has come back to life. If you and the rest of the ranchers around here had any sense, you'd round up your outfits and drive that bunch of owlhoots out of the valley."

"Been thinking about that." Adam Norton spoke in a milder tone. "What makes you so interested in what we cattlemen do about the Horseshoe Bunch?"

"Because we just escaped from the jail in Deerhorn after we were arrested and accused of being the leaders of the Horseshoe Bunch," said Solitaire quietly. "Ward Barlow and the sheriff threw us in jail."

"The leaders of the Horseshoe Bunch!" Norton stared at Solitaire and Dismal in amazement. "Why did Barlow think that?"

"Might as well tell you the whole story," Solitaire said. "Dismal and I figure we can trust you, Mr. Norton."

"Thanks," said Norton, and he looked pleased. "Go ahead."

Solitaire told everything that had happened since he and Dismal had arrived in Deerhorn the previous morning.

"Looks like somebody is mighty anxious to get you two, all right," Norton said with a frown as Solitaire finished. "And it's beginning to look to me like the Horseshoe Bunch coming back to the valley has more behind it than just Slash Lawson returning from the grave—if he did."

"Just what I figure," agreed Solitaire.

He gazed thoughtfully at the owner of the Triangle. "I'm going to ask you a personal question, Mr. Norton."

"What is it?" demanded Norton.

"What hold has Reece Shadwell over you that has you scared to death of him?" Solitaire asked.

He fully expected Adam Norton to fly into a rage and order him out of the house, but the rancher did nothing of the sort. For a moment Norton sat motionless, then deliberately placed his cigar down in an ash tray on the table beside him.

"I've been a fool," he said slowly. "I got into some right stiff poker games at Shadwell's place, and got the idea that I could win back all I had lost, so I kept playing every night for a week. Finally I owed Shadwell twenty thousand dollars. He was reasonable about it. Got me to give him a mortage on the Triangle and gave me six months to pay it up."

"Doesn't sound so bad so far," Solitaire said. "Go on."

"A little over a month ago Shadwell demanded the money at once or he'd foreclose the mortage on this spread, since it was due," went on Norton. "I got the money and paid him all right, but it was the greatest mistake of my life!"

"Why?" demanded Solitaire.

"I can't tell you that." There was a note of fear in Adam Norton's voice. "I can't tell anybody! I—"

All three men abruptly leaped to their feet as the glass in a front window shattered with a loud crash. A bullet whizzed by Solitaire and thudded into the wall. The roar of the gun sounded muffled, as if the weapon were some distance away.

Swiftly Adam Norton blew out the oil lamp on the table beside him, plunging the room into darkness. Another window broke as a bullet hit it. This one was on the south side of the ranchhouse, for the living room formed the southwest corner of the building.

"Looks like a raid on the ranch," Norton muttered in the darkness. "The Horseshoe Bunch again, I reckon."

"It's a raid, all right," Dismal said grimly. "Those hombres out there aren't playing marbles."

Solitaire made his way to the nearest window. Broken glass crunched beneath his boots as he peered out. The night was dark and still, and now rain was pattering down softly. His first thought was that his pinto and Dismal's roan were getting wet out at the hitch-rail.

He didn't see anyone at first. The men who were attacking the ranch were clever. Evidently they had dismounted before sneaking closer.

A volley of gunfire from somewhere at the rear of the ranchhouse told Solitaire that the raiders were also attacking the men in the bunkhouse and the Triangle waddies were returning the fire.

"How many men you got in the bunkhouse, Norton?" Solitaire asked, from where he stood at the window with gun ready.

"About ten if they're all there," said the rancher owner. "Some of them may have gone to town."

Norton was at another window, while Dismal was hunkered beside a third.

"This gives me a plumb spooky feeling," Norton

said uneasily. "If Slash Lawson has come back from the dead, and is leading the Horseshoe Bunch, one of the first things he would do would be to try to wipe me out. I was one of the men who lynched him that night!"

CHAPTER XIII

Guns roared outside as the raiders at the front of the Triangle ranchhouse again went into action. Bullets thudded into the walls and hummed through the windows.

Solitaire calmly took stock of the situation and decided he didn't like it. Judging by the gunfire and the shadowy figures he could make out moving around outside, he was sure there were at least twenty or more men in the raiding party. From the way they were going about it, the Horseshoe Bunch plainly intended to wipe out the Triangle.

"How much ammunition have you got, Norton?" Solitaire asked.

"Don't know exactly," Norton said. "What bullets I've got in the cartridge belt I'm wearing, some loaded rifles over there in the gunrack on the wall. Hard to say how many."

"All we've got is the cartridges in our belts and a couple of borrowed guns," said Dismal. "Those hombres out there could keep this up all night."

A thought struck Solitaire. "Where is Buck tonight, Norton?" he asked.

"I don't know," Norton said. "That son of mine was right resentful about the way I talked to Nancy Young today. Buck didn't have much to say since then, and he left after supper this evening without telling me where he was going."

Solitaire was peering out the window. He caught a glimpse of a man in a yellow slicker raising a rifle. He fired, and the man with the rifle went down.

"I've been wondering about something," Solitaire said as he reloaded the gun Shadwell had given him from the cartridges in his gunbelt. "If Denver and Waco left the front door open when they left, it might be right easy for some of the raiders to get into the house."

"He would think of that, Norton," Dismal said. "Solitaire is the worrying type. Let him get started and he is like a chicken with one hen, or maybe I mean a hen with one chick."

"Riders coming!" shouted Solitaire. "A big bunch of 'em! If they're part of this raiding outfit, we're in for bad trouble."

"I've never seen any good trouble," said Dismal. In front of the ranchhouse the roaring of the guns grew louder as the mounted men rode closer. A wave of relief swept over Solitaire as he saw that the new arrivals were firing at the raiders.

"Looks like we've got friends coming calling!" he

exclaimed.

"Dust off the welcome mat," said Dismal.

For a few minutes fighting raged all around the ranch buildings. The three men in the ranchhouse did not dare risk further shooting from the windows, for it was too hard to distinguish friends from foes in that milling bunch outside.

Then abruptly the raiders beat a hasty retreat, ducking into the shadows and heading for the horses they had hidden back among the trees. The darkness and the rain aided their escape, but the unknown avengers were close on their heels, and guns were still roaring.

Solitaire saw that there were at least twenty men in the bunch that had come to the aid of the Triangle outfit. Most of them rode off in pursuit of the speeding raiders, but four horsemen whirled their mounts and rode toward the dark ranchhouse. They drew rein at the porch.

"Dad?" called the strong young voice of Buck Norton from outside. "Are you in there?"

"Right here, son!" Adam Norton called from a window. "Who have you got with you?"

"Tom Young and the Diamond Y outfit," answered Buck.

"The Diamond Y!" exclaimed Norton, amazement in his voice. "What are they doing here?"

"I brought them," said Buck. "Come on out on the porch, Dad." A match flickered and became a tiny glow as Adam Norton moved to the lamp on the table and lighted it. Solitaire turned from the window, dropping his borrowed gun back into the holster on his right hip. Dismal also put Sheriff Gilford's Colt back into leather.

Then, with Dismal and Solitaire following, Norton went to the front door.

"Come in, all of you," Norton said curtly.

"Not unless I know I'm welcome," said a thingray-haired man who Solitaire knew was Tom Young.

For an instant Adam Norton stood motionless, gazing at his neighbor rancher from the Diamond Y. Then he smiled and held out his right hand.

"You're welcome, Tom," Norton said. "I'm beholden to you now. Shucks, we've been a couple of old fools!"

"Figure so, too, Adam," Tom Young said mildly. He took Norton's hand and shook it warmly. "But we're never too old to learn."

As Norton went back along the hall with Young walking beside him, they were talking a mile a minute.

Solitaire and Dismal stepped aside to let them pass into the living room. At the rear of the hall Mark Lucan, the Triangle foreman, appeared. He stopped short, grimly watching the men who entered the living room.

Solitaire wondered where Lucan had been while

the raid was going on. He wanted to know more about this foreman who was also the bodyguard of a man he apparently hated.

As Norton and the others went on into the living room Solitaire, Dismal and Lucan were left alone in the hall.

"Get out!" snarled Lucan. "I don't want you on this ranch!"

"Sure is funny, Solitaire," Dismal drawled, a mocking note in his voice. "All of a sudden the Triangle has a new boss."

"Lucan!" Adam Norton stood in the doorway of the living room, a scowl on his face. "I'm still giving the orders around here. What's the idea of telling these men to leave?"

"I don't like jail-birds," Lucan said sullenly.

"There's just one thing I want to know," Solitaire said as he dropped his gun back into the holster. "Have you been in town since this afternoon, Lucan?"

"No." Lucan frowned. "Why?"

"Then if you know we've been in jail you were listening outside the door when we were talking to Mr. Norton before the raid," Solitaire said. "I reckon you don't like that much, Norton."

"I don't." Norton glared angrily at his foreman. "This is the last straw, Lucan. For the past couple of weeks you've been acting like you ruled the roost around here. I'm good and sick of it. You're fired!"

For a moment the two men stared at each other,

and it was the foreman who finally spoke.

"You're making a mistake, Norton." Lucan's tone was cold and menacing. "A bad mistake. Sheriff Gilford will be right interested in learning what I've got to tell him about you."

Norton's shoulders slumped. "Sorry Mark," he said, his tone meek. "Just forget it. Reckon I was a bit hasty. Keep your job here. I spoke before I thought."

"That's better." Lucan nodded, and his expression was that of a wolf licking its chops. "Much better. And these two saddle bums leave here, pronto!"

Dismal sauntered to the front door, and Solitaire followed. They did not look back as they went across the porch and down the steps to the waiting horses at the hitch-rail.

Solitaire glanced back at the ranchhouse as he got his slicker out of the saddle-roll and slipped into it. The door closed with a bang, and then there was no sound but the pattering of the rain, still falling steadily and monotonously.

"I don't understand it," Dismal said, as he got his own slicker and put it on. "Norton doesn't seem like a hombre who scares easy."

"Wasn't hard to guess that Lucan has something on him," said Solitaire. "Something Norton doesn't want the sheriff to know. We've got to find out what it is, I reckon, Dismal."

"We might go back inside and ask Norton," said

Dismal dryly. "But I've got a feeling he wouldn't tell. He just doesn't seem to be in the right mood. What'll we do now?"

"Somehow," said Solitaire, "I think this would be a fine time to mosey over to the Diamond Y."

CHAPTER XIV

Solitaire Stevens and Dismal Day rode steadily on through the night. Finally they topped a rise. They could see the buildings of a ranch nestling at the foot of the hill.

"That must be the Diamond Y," Dismal said. "And it sure looks deserted."

Solitaire agreed. The ranch buildings were dark. No lights gleamed through the windows of the ranch-house or the bunkhouse. Solitaire didn't like it. There was something ominous about the way the spread looked.

He started his horse and rode on down the hill. Dismal followed close behind him. Neither man spoke, and as they approached the buildings they guided their mounts so that the hoofbeats of the horses were muffled by the soft wet ground beneath their feet.

They reached the front of the ranchhouse. Beyond the porch the open front door was a gaping maw of black amid the shadows. Silently Solitaire and Dismal slid out of their saddles, and let the reins of their horses drop to the ground. Quickly they unfastened their slickers and took them off. With swift, deft fingers they placed the slickers back in their saddlerolls.

"Let's go," Solitaire said softly when they had finished. "I've got a feeling there is something wrong here."

"Me, too," Dismal said in a whisper.

They went to the porch and walked quietly up the steps, then halted as they stood staring at a window to the left of the door. The window shade was tightly drawn, but a faint crack of light gleamed through at the bottom.

"We're supposed to sing out and ask if there is anybody home," Dismal said. "But I don't feel at all polite."

"Me either," said Solitaire.

In the shadows at the left side of the house, a horse nickered and stirred restlessly.

"Horse hidden around at the side of the house," Dismal said softly. "Maybe more than one. It's a wicked world, Solitaire."

They drew their guns and stepped in through the open front door. Darkness seemed to swallow them, and they stood motionless, trying to accustom their eyes to the gloom.

From somewhere ahead Solitaire heard the rumble of voices, though he could not distinguish the words.

He found the wall of a hall and guided himself by placing his left hand against it from time to time as he advanced toward the sound of the voices. Dismal followed so close behind him that once the little ranny bumped into the man ahead when Solitaire halted abruptly.

Solitaire reached a closed door and found that the voices came from beyond this. They were clearer now, and he was able to distinguish the words of the man who spoke.

"I tell you that's the way it was, Nancy," the man said. "Buck Norton coming here tonight and asking your father and the Diamond Y crew to protect the Triangle from a raid was a trap."

"I don't believe it," came Nancy Young's voice. "Buck wouldn't lead Dad and our men into any trap. Nothing you say will convince me of that. Why, Buck loves me."

"Of course he loves you," said the man. "But Buck is weak, too weak to defy his father. It was Adam Norton who planned the trap, I'm sure of that."

"But why?" Nancy demanded.

"Because Norton hates Tom Young," said the deep masculine voice. "Oh, I know you never liked me much, Nancy, even though I've been plumb crazy about you since the first time I ever saw you."

"I never liked or disliked you, Vance," Nancy said.

"I haven't known you well enough for that."

Solitaire frowned in the darkness of the hall as

he listened. So it was Vance Rand in there with the girl.

"That doesn't matter now, Nancy," Rand said. "When I learned what happened, my first thought was to get to you and break the news as gently as possible. It was terrible!"

"Terrible?" There was sudden fear in Nancy's voice. "What do you mean, Vance?"

"The Horseshoe Bunch was waiting," Rand said. "It all happened so quickly that your father and the rest didn't even have a chance to defend themselves."

"You mean that Dad is dead?" Nancy gasped.

"I'm sorry," Rand said. "Looks like Norton hated him because he felt that Tom Young knew too much."

"Too much about what?" Nancy asked bleakly.

"About Adam Norton and his outfit really being the Horseshoe Bunch," said Rand.

"There's a man who doesn't fool about it when he starts lying," Dismal said softly as he stood beside Solitaire listening at the closed door. "Nancy believes him, I don't like that at all."

"Neither do I," said Solitaire.

He turned the knob and shoved the door open, and then stood in the open doorway covering Vance Rand with his gun.

"You've done enough lying for one night, Rand," Solitaire said coldly.

Vance Rand turned slowly to face the two men at the door. His dark eyes gleamed, but his thin hard face was expressionless. He was careful to keep his hand away from his gun.

"Your father is all right, Nancy," Solitaire said.
"Buck brought him and your outfit to the Triangle just in time to drive off the Horseshoe Bunch as they were raiding the spread. Dismal and I just came from there—"

"Of course you did," interrupted Rand. "Don't forget that I was in town this afternoon when the sheriff arrested you two and placed you in jail on suspicion of being the leaders of the Horseshoe Bunch. It is only natural that you would head for the Triangle when you escaped."

"Why?" demanded Solitaire.

"Because what I just told Nancy is true," said Rand, and he made it sound convincing. "Adam Norton is the real head of the raiders and you two have been working for him under cover."

Nancy sat in a chair looking from one man to the other as if unable to decide which one to believe.

"Get his gun, Dismal," Solitaire ordered, a cold ruthless rage sweeping over him. "I'm going to make him tell the truth if I have to beat the stuffing out of him."

Dismal stepped forward, yanked the thin-faced man's gun out of the holster, thrust the gun into his belt and moved away from Rand.

"All right," Solitaire said. "Let's see if you can tell the truth."

He stepped toward Rand. In an instant the two men were fighting, smashing heavy fists at each other. Solitaire landed a right to the chin that rocked Rand back on his heels. Rand recovered quickly, and the two men again closed in. Solitaire landed a right to Rand's jaw for the second time since the fight had started. Rand's head rocked with the blow. Solitaire's left caught the owner of the Rolling R a hard blow over the heart, and Rand grunted in pain.

It was beginning to be quite obvious that Rand was a much better fighter with his gun than he was with his fists. Solitaire was a trained boxer and he was revealing his skill now as he really went into action. He was gradually giving Vance Rand a thorough beating. Rand was gasping for breath, and he staggered as he moved. His blows had lost a good bit of

their force.

"Go on!" Solitaire snapped. "Tell Nancy that you were lying about her father being dead and Buck leading the Diamond Y into a trap."

"All right," Rand panted. "I've had enough." He lowered his arms, the will to fight apparently gone. "I was lying, Nancy. Far as I know your father is all right."

"Oh, thank God for that," Nancy said.

Rand staggered as though about to fall. He grabbed at Dismal, who caught him by the shoulders and held him up.

"You're all right, Rand," Dismal said. "Solitaire

just knocked you kind of dizzy."

"I'm all right now," Rand said, his voice suddenly sounding stronger.

As he moved back, the gun he had grabbed out of Dismal's belt was in his hand, covering the little cowboy and Solitaire.

"I don't seem to be at my brightest," Dismal said, staring at the gun.

"Always figured on downing you two if I got the chance," Rand said coldly. "Looks like this is it."

Solitaire stepped back as if frightened by the menacing .45 in Rand's hand, and with a sweep of his arm knocked the oil lamp off the table in the center of the room. The lamp broke as it hit the floor. The flame flickered out, plunging the room into darkness. Solitaire dropped as Rand fired, the bullet whistling by where Solitaire had been standing an instant before. In the darkness Nancy uttered a scream.

There was the sound of rapid footsteps, and then the door of the room slammed shut. Solitaire waited, gun ready in his hand.

"That was Rand who just left," came Dismal's voice out of the darkness. "He sure went by me in a hurry. Guess he just didn't like it here."

Dismal opened the door, and Solitaire followed him along the hall and out to the porch. They were just in time to see a horseman departing from the left side of the ranchhouse, riding fast. "Rand is still going," Solitaire said. "When he leaves he does it right away quick."

"We better go back inside and tell Nancy the war is over. And then we'll be heading for Deerhorn to find the real leader of the Horseshoe Bunch."

CHAPTER XV

When they reached Deerhorn Solitaire and Dismal rode boldly along the street of the little cowtown and stopped in front of the livery stable. It was late, long after midnight, and most of the buildings were dark, though there were still lights burning in the Flowing Cup Saloon, in the sheriff's office and in the hotel.

Solitaire dismounted, handed the pinto's reins to Dismal and went to the closed door of the stable and knocked. There was no answer, and he knocked louder. Finally a small door built in the big door opened, and Sam Craig stood there, fully dressed.

"No, it ain't true; I'm just having a nightmare," muttered the old stablekeeper as he peered out at them. "You two haven't come back again!"

"We sure have, Sam," Solitaire said smiling at him.
"Want you to put our horses up for the night. We aim
to stay at the hotel."

"It's your funeral, and you're likely to have it right soon if you stay around this town," Craig told them. "Folks know you busted out of jail and they're looking for you with blood in their eyes. Seems you killed one of Vance Rand's waddies when he tried to stop you from getting away. That's what Rand is claiming, anyway."

Solitaire's blue eyes narrowed as he heard the stablekeeper's words. So it had been Rand's men waiting in back of the jail to shoot down the two prisoners.

"Open the big door so we can get the horses in, Sam," Solitaire said.

Craig stepped back inside and closed the small door, then rolled back the big one. Dismal rode in, leading the pinto, and Solitaire followed the horses inside. Craig rolled the big door shut again and bolted it from the inside. Solitaire and Dismal unsaddled their horses, gave the animals a rubdown, then turned the pinto and the roan into a couple of empty stalls.

Solitaire saw that the body of Ed Lang was gone. He also saw that the stablekeeper was watching them closely, his old mule-like face expressionless in the lantern light. Solitaire glanced at the stall next to the one in which he had placed the pinto. There were fresh tracks there, made by a horse that had recently been out in the mud and rain.

"You were one of the seven men who lynched Slash Lawson last fall, weren't you, Sam?" Solitaire asked. He was merely guessing, but he made it sound as if there were no doubt of it in his mind.

"That's right," Craig said. "There were seven of us. Reece Shadwell, Lem King, King's foreman Dave Hopper, Adam and Buck Norton, Fred Dabney and Me. I didn't like the idea, so when they started the hanging I rode away. I didn't see them when they strung up Lawson."

"What did you do with Lang's body after we left tonight?" Dismal asked curiously.

"Turned it over to the undertaker," said the stablekeeper. "I didn't want it around here."

"We'll be going now," said Solitaire. "Unlock the door, will you please, Sam?"

Craig went to the small door in the big one and unbolted it. The back of his flannel shirt was still damp across the shoulders as if he might recently have been riding somewhere in the rain. He wore a gunbelt, but there was no gun in the holster.

"What happened to your gun?" Dismal asked.

"Lost it," Craig said curtly. "You sure ask a lost of questions."

"It's a bad habit I've got," Dismal said mournfully "Just doesn't seem to be any cure for it."

"There could be," Craig said, and it almost sounded like a threat.

Solitaire went through the small door and Dismal followed. Craig slammed the door shut, and they heard the bolt slide into place. The chair in which the old stablekeeper usually sat in front of the building was still there. Something white lying on the

ground near it caught Solitaire's eye as he glanced at the chair. He walked over, found it was a folded paper, hesitated an instant and then thrust it into a pocket of his levis.

"Now why didn't I think of that before?" Solitaire said as he walked over to Dismal, who stood waiting.

"Mind reading wasn't one of the things I did in the circus," said Dismal, "so I don't know what you're talking about."

"Shadwell said you never know who your friends are," said Solitaire. "And I figure he was right."

"Meaning what?" demanded Dismal.

"That we're heading for the Flowing Cup to have a little talk with Reece Shadwell," Solitaire said.

"Open the lion's mouth wider," muttered Dismal. "We're coming right in!"

Quietly the two went along the street, keeping in the shadows as much as possible. When they reached an alley at the side of the Saloon, Solitaire led the way into it, and Dismal followed.

"I'm not happy about this idea," whispered Dismal.
"I haven't forgotten about that fat Shadwell giving us a useless gun. I don't figure that hombre loves us."

"Quiet!" whispered Solitaire. "I'm looking for Shadwell's private office. Hope he's there."

He found a door leading out into the alley, and an open window was beside it. A light shone out through the window. Solitaire moved closer and peered in. The stout saloon owner was at a desk in his office go-

ing over some papers. An oil lamp burned on the desk beside him. He appeared to be alone.

"Shadwell!" Solitaire's gun covered the big man.

"Let us in. We want to talk to you."

Reece Shadwell's head lifted quickly and he stared at Solitaire standing outside the window. Frowning, he put the papers down on the desk, lumbered to his feet and locked the inner door of his office. Then he unlocked and opened the outside door.

Solitaire and Dismal came in as Shadwell stepped back. Dismal quickly locked the door, closed the window and drew down the blind. Shadwell lumbered back to his chair at the desk and sat down heavily.

"I thought you'd be far away from Deerhorn by now," he said softly, and chuckled. "But it's hard to judge what you two will do next."

"We figure you're a little uncertain, too," Dismal said dryly. "Specially with guns, Shadwell."

"Meaning what?" Shadwell stared uncomprehendingly at the little ranny.

"Suppose you let me do the talking, Dismal," said Solitaire, command in his voice. "There are some things I want to get straight in my mind, and I figure Reece can help me do it."

"Glad to try. "the big saloon keeper leaned back in his chair. "What's on your mind, Solitaire?"

"Slash Lawson, for one thing." Solitaire had put his gun back into the holster, and now he dropped into a chair and motioned Dismal to another. "That night you and the other men lynched him, are you sure he was dead?"

"He was hanging from the limb of a tree when we rode away," said Shadwell. "A man doesn't usually live long in a fix like that." He frowned again uneasily. "But I couldn't swear he was dead. He might have lived if somebody got there and cut him down in a hurry."

"I'm just guessing," said Solitaire, "but I've got an idea Lawson didn't die that night." He reached into his pocket and drew out the empty .45 shell he had found near the grave at the hanging tree. "Found this near there. Any of you do any shooting at the tree that night?"

"No." Shadwell shook his head. "What are you getting at, Solitaire?"

"I figure that some one of you seven who lynched the blacksmith might have come back after the rest had gone," Solitaire said. "This man found Lawson still alive, shot him and buried him."

"Then he died anyway," said Shadwell.

"Maybe, I'm not plumb sure of it." Solitaire studied the shell in his hand. "Funny thing about the gun that fired this shell," he commented. "The firing pin strikes way off center."

"What of it?" demanded Shadwell. "Lots of guns might do that."

"But this happens to make exactly the same markings on a shell that the gun you gave us to escape from the jail tonight does," said Solitaire. He got to his feet and walked over to the desk, and then drew the gun from his holster. He snapped out an empty shell in it. "Take a look at those two shells, Reece."

Shadwell examined the two shells carefully in the light of the oil lamp. Finally he nodded.

"You're right," he said. "They are marked exactly alike."

"Where'd you get this gun you gave me?" Solitaire asked.

"Had it in a drawer of the desk here in my office," said Shadwell. "Somebody gave it to me recently—I forgot who it was now. Anyway, when I headed for the jail earlier this evening I picked it up, looked at the gun to be sure it was loaded and took it along."

"Either you're the best liar I ever heard, or we sure misjudged you, Shadwell," Dismal said as he sat listening. "Because the cartridges in the gun were fixed so they wouldn't fire."

"Good glory!" Shadwell looked at him in amazement. "And you thought I told you to break out of jail, and gave you a gun that wouldn't work!"

"We've been right certain of it up to now," said Solitaire, seeing that two hombres were waiting to down us when we slipped out of the door of the jail. I killed one of 'em; the other got away."

"But if you thought that, it's a wonder you didn't shoot me first and ask questions afterwards!" exclaimed Shadwell, a dazed expression on his big

moon-like face. "Yet you came here acting right friendly."

"That was Solitaire's idea," growled Dismal. "He's so smart that half the time I don't understand him."

"The hombre who is so anxious to get us must be the leader of the Horseshoe Bunch," Solitaire said, and he smiled at the Saloon owner. "And I don't think you're that man, Reece."

"I'm glad of that." Shadwell said, relief in his voice. "But what makes you so sure?"

"The Flowing Cup is the only saloon in town, and does a good business, doesn't it?" Solitaire asked.

"You might say so," Shadwell said. "I've got no kick coming." He looked puzzled. "What's that got to do with it?"

"If you've got a paying business, then you'd be a fool to lead a bunch of owlhoots around raiding towns and killing people and stealing cattle. There's no future in that," said Solitaire, "specially when they rob your own saloon."

"I see." Shadwell nodded. "As Dismal said, you're smart, Solitaire."

There was a knock on the door that led to the alley. The three men glanced sharply at each other; then Shadwell got to his feet and went to the door. He hesitated and looked back at Solitaire and Dismal.

"Better not let anyone find you two here," he whispered. "Hide in that closet over there until I see who is outside."

Solitaire and Dismal hurried into the closet. Solitaire closed the door, but not all the way. He left it open just enough to be able to peer out through the crack.

Reece Shadwell opened the door to the alley, after unlocking it. He stepped back with a startled gasp as he saw the tall, gray-haired, gaunt man who stood there menacingly.

"I've been looking for you," said the man who called himself Shadow Smith. "You were one of them. I'm beginning to remember. We rode through the rain; then we stopped at a big tree. There was a rope around my neck, but I said I'd come back rom the dead, and I did!"

"You're Slash Lawson!" stammered Shadwell, stark fear in his voice. "But you don't look like him. His hair was black, and yours is gray. He wasn't more than forty, and you look at least sixty!"

"A man ages fast when he's dead and buried and comes to life again," said Shadow Smith. He glared with those dark eyes. "But I'm Slash Lawson all right. I remember now."

"But you're dead!" protested Shadwell, his voice rising to a wail. "I saw you hanging from the tree when we rode away!"

"Yeah," said Lawson. "But I got my hands free just before you drove my horse out from under me. It was so dark that you didn't see me reach up and hold onto the rope so that it didn't choke me. I had a jackknife in my pocket; nobody thought to take that away from me. After you were all gone I cut myself down. I thought I was free, but I was wrong."

"Wrong?" Shadwell sank weakly into his chair at

the desk. "What do you mean?"

"One of you came back," said Lawson, as he stepped into the office. "I couldn't see his face, it was too dark, so I don't know which one it was. But that man shot me down, and he was so sure I was dead he dug a grave and buried me while I was half-conscious."

"And you dug your way out?" demanded Shadwell. In the closet Solitaire and Dismal listened tensely, anxious not to miss a word.

"That's right: I dug my way out," said Slash Lawson. "But it took a long time, and with the bullet wounds I was more dead than alive when I finally reached fresh air. I managed to get out of the valley that night, but what I went through took twenty years off my life. For a long time I haven't been able to remember anything, but tonight it all comes back to me."

"But why should one of us come back and deliberately shoot and bury you?" asked Shadwell in bewilderment.

"Because I was just the segundo of the Horseshoe Bunch," Lawson said slowly. "I figure the man who came back was the leader of the outfit. He tried to kill me because he was afraid I might talk." "One of us," Shadwell said in an awed voice, his eyes on the closet door. "I can't believe it!"

"You might as well tell your friends to come out," said Slash Lawson. "Guess it must be right stuffy in that closet."

Solitaire opened the door and came out of the closet, Dismal close behind him. They both looked a bit sheepish.

"I seem to remember you two," Lawson said. "I've seen you before. Who are you?"

"I'm Solitaire Stevens, and this is Dismal Day," said Solitaire. "Have you been leading the new Horseshoe Bunch, Lawson?"

"No." Lawson shook his head. "Are they riding again? I seem to remember something about masked horsemen, but it ain't clear."

He backed toward the door that led to the alley, his hands on the butts of the white-handled guns in his holsters. The other three men remained motionless, watching.

"I've leaving now," Lawson said. "Don't try to stop me." He centered the gaze of his dark eyes on Shadwell. "Because I know who the leader of the Horseshoe Bunch was, and I'm going to get him!" There was menace and a strange weariness in the deep voice. "I'm going to make him pay for what he did to me. He might have been you, Shadwell!"

Reaching behind him, Lawson opened the door that had swung closed. He backed out into the alley

his gaze still fixed on the three men in the office. Then the door closed and he was out of sight.

For a moment or two there was no sound save the sputtering of the lamp on the desk. Then the chair creaked beneath the stout man's weight as the saloon owner stirred uneasily.

"So he did come back from the dead!" muttered Shadwell shakily. "That man gives me the creeps."

"Me, too," said Dismal.

The door slowly opened and Lawson again stood there, his gaunt face contorted into a ghastly grimace. He staggered back into the office.

"Looks like—won't be able to finish the job," he said in a strangled sort of voice. "Asking you three to do it for me."

He pitched forward, to sprawl face down on the floor. The bone handle of a knife that was sticking in his back gleamed in the lamplight.

Solitaire leaped to the open door. He peered out into the alley, gun in his hand. There was no one there, but he caught the faint patter of running feet in the distance. A cool breeze blew against his face.

"Looks like he won't come back this time," Dismal said, his voice hushed. He was kneeling beside the still figure on the floor, feeling for pulse and heartbeat that weren't there. "Slash Lawson is dead!"

CHAPTER XVI

Shadwell rose from his chair, a scowl on his big face, his bald head gleaming in the light. There was suddenly an air of authority about him as he spoke.

"We've got a job to do," he said with grim determination. "The job Slash asked us to do before he cashed in. I owe him that."

"Meaning we've got to find the boss of the Horse-shoe Bunch," said Solitaire, a curious expression on his strong face as he gazed at the stout saloon owner. "Don't forget he said it might be you, Reece."

"I haven't forgotten." Shadwell glared at Solitaire defiantly. "And it's only by finding that devilish boss that I can prove Lawson didn't really mean me."

"All right," Solitaire said. "Then the first thing we've got to do is round up every honest man in the valley, find the Horseshoe Bunch and wipe 'em out."

"Afraid the boys wouldn't like that," growled a deep voice from the alley door.

Vance Rand stood in the open doorway, the gun in his right hand covering the three men in the saloonkeeper's office. Two of his gunslicks were behind him, their guns also ready.

"I knew it!" exclaimed Dismal disgustedly. "Just as things are getting interesting, somebody spoils the party."

There was a swagger in Vance Rand's walk as he came into the office. His two gunmen followed him and stood on either side of the door. They still held their guns ready, and there was quiet menace in the trio.

Solitaire stood watching them, no fear in his attitude. His gaze lingered on Van Rand's lean face, and there was faint mockery in the blue eyes.

"So you're admitting you and your outfit are part of the Horseshoe Bunch, Rand," Solitaire said coldly. "Must be mighty sure of yourself to come out into the open this way."

"You three aren't going to get a chance to tell anybody about it." Rand said, hate in his deep voice. "I haven't forgotten what happened out at the Diamond Y tonight."

"Neither have we," said Solitaire. "And Nancy Young hasn't either. This part of the country is no longer safe for you, Rand."

"You won't live long enough to do much talking about it." Rand said, the hate within him still a restless driving thing. "Don't worry about that."

"You mean you're going to shoot us down like dogs?" demanded Shadwell anxiously.

"Never shot a dog in my life," Rand said. "I like animals a heap better than I do humans."

"Bet it ain't mutual," said Dismal. "Animals are particular."

Casually he edged closer to Rand. The Rolling R owner frowned heavily at the little cowboy.

"Slide your gun out of the holster and drop it to the floor easy-like, Day," Rand commanded.

"All right."

Dismal drew his gun out of the holster and dropped it. The Colt landed on the toe of his right foot as his leg came up. He kicked out, and the gun struck Rand squarely in the face with such force that it knocked him back.

Solitaire's gun flashed out as he saw what had happened, covering the two gunslicks at the door before they could raise the weapons in their hands.

"Drop those guns!" Solitaire snapped. "And do it quick!"

The two gunslicks let their Colts drop to the floor. At the same time Rand reeled back. But he had held onto his gun and was raising it to shoot when he stumbled over Slash Lawson's body and went down. His right hand twisted beneath him, and the gun it held roared as he struck the floor. His body shuddered once, then grew still as he sprawled face down.

"What happened to him?" demanded Shadwell, staring wild-eyed at Rand. "Looks like he shot him-self!"

Dismal saw that Solitaire was keeping the two men at the door covered, so the little partner leaned down and rolled Rand over on his back. There was a bullet hole in Rand's flannel shirt just over the heart.

"Strangest thing I've ever seen," muttered Dismal.

"He killed himself with his own gun."

"Looks like Slash Lawson killed a man after he was dead himself," Solitaire said. "Rand would still be alive now if he hadn't tripped over Lawson's body."

Solitaire stepped menacingly toward the two men at the door, a cold gleam in his eyes and his face hard.

"And now you two are going to talk," he said grimly. "Vance Rand admitted his outfit was part of the Horseshoe Bunch. Was he the boss of the raiders?"

"Not the big boss," one of the men said quickly. "That feller gave the orders to Rand, and he passed 'em on to the rest of us."

"Who was the big boss?" demanded Solitaire.

"We don't know, honest we don't," said the other gunslick nervously. "None of us ever seen the big boss. At least if we did we didn't know who he was."

Someone was pounding on the locked inside door of the office that led into the saloon.

"You all right, Shadwell?" called a voice from the other side of the door. "I heard a shot in there. Open the door!"

Dismal walked over and picked up the guns that Rand's men had dropped to the floor. Shadwell looked at Solitaire, who nodded. The saloonkeeper went to the inner door and unlocked it and flung it open. Ace Tyler stood there peering into the office.

"What happened, Reece?" Tyler asked.

"We've been having a little trouble, Ace," said Shadwell. "That gray-haired man on the floor was Slash Lawson."

"Lawson!" exclaimed Tyler, eyes wide with surprise. "Then he did come back!"

"He came back from the dead all right," said Shadwell. "But it was only a little while ago that his memory came back, too. Then somebody out in the alley knifed him."

"There wasn't nobody in the alley when we sneaked in there," one of Rand's gunmen said quickly. "And we sure didn't stick a knife in anybody."

"What happened to Vance Rand?" demanded Tyler, staring at the other dead man.

"He came in here with these two men of his, admitted they all belonged to the Horseshoe Bunch, and he was going to kill all three of us," Shadwell said. The stout saloon owner walked over to his desk and sat down. "But Dismal managed to kick a gun into Vance's face. Then Rand stumbled over Lawson's body. In falling he shot and killed himself."

Voices came from the alley, and Sheriff Matt Gilford appeared with his three deputies. Ward Barlow and Sam Craig were with them. Gilford scowled as he saw Solitaire covering the two gunslicks. "So you two came back," the sheriff growled, "and brought more trouble. What's happened here?"

It was Reece Shadwell who told him, as he again quickly related all that had happened since Solitaire and Dismal had appeared at his office. When he finished Ward Barlow snorted.

"Nothing I've just heard convinces me that Solitaire Stevens and Dismal Day are not the leaders of the Horseshoe Bunch," the banker declared. "What about the note and the twisted horseshoe you found on them, Sheriff? What this town needs is better law enforcement, a sheriff and deputies who can be trusted not to let prisoners escape after they have been placed in jail. I'm going to bring that up at the next election!"

"Aw, shut up, Barlow," said Shadwell. "None of us want to listen to one of your long-winded speeches."

At Gilford's orders the deputies took Rand's two gunslicks off to jail. The sheriff also told one of his men to wake up the undertaker and have him come and take charge of the two dead men.

No one paid any attention to Ward Barlow as the banker continued to storm and rave. Finally he left in disgust. Ace Tyler yawned and announced that he was tired and was going to his room in the hotel. He departed, leaving by the door leading out into the alley. Old Sam Craig, the liveryman, still hung around, curious and apparently afraid he might miss something.

"We've got a job to do, Sheriff," said Shadwell. "Thanks to Solitaire and Dismal, we've made a good start on it, but we've got to round up every man we can get and wipe out the Horseshoe Bunch."

"That's right, Sheriff," said Solitaire. "And we better have them ready to ride the first thing in the morning."

"Figured it was time somebody thought of that," Craig said acidly, as he turned to the door. "I'll be riding with the rest of you. 'Night."

The old stable keeper marched out into the darkness, and they heard his footsteps fading into the distance.

Solitaire glanced somberly at the two still figures on the floor and then dropped into a chair. Shadwell's desk chair creaked as the stout man moved restlessly. The sheriff stood leaning against the side of the door leading out into the alley, and he looked more like a tired farmer than ever. Dismal drew the two guns he had taken from the gunslicks out of his belt and placed them on the desk.

"I'd kind of like to have my own guns back again, Matt," Solitaire said. "Been used to them for a long time."

"Of course, Gilford said. "Stop by the office any time and I'll give them to you, Solitaire."

Dismal glanced at the sheriff's still empty holster and grinned. "As I told you when I took it away from you, this is a nice gun, Matt," He said, drawing the sheriff's gun out of his holster. He handed it to the lawman, butt first. "Thanks for the use of it."

"You're sure welcome," Gilford said, taking the gun and dropping it into leather. "I've got others, of course, but I kind of missed that gun."

"Now that you're all through giving away guns, you haven't any yourself, Dismal," Shadwell said with

a chuckle.

"Something to that," said Dismal. "Maybe I'd better borrow one of these guns on the desk."

"Go ahead," said the sheriff. "Their owners won't be needing them right soon." He frowned. "At least I hope not."

Dismal examined the two guns on the table, and finally selected one of them, checked to make sure it was loaded, and thrust it into his holster.

"Listen!" Solitaire suddenly exclaimed as his keen ears caught a sound from the street. "Somebody is riding out of town—moving fast! Might be someone aiming to warn the Horseshoe Bunch!"

"You're right," snapped Gilford. "Come on!"

Knowing there was not a moment to lose, the sheriff raced through the alley to the street, the three other men close behind him. They reached the plank walk just in time to see a rider disappearing at the lower end of the street, the horse going at a gallop.

"Too far off to see who he is," Solitaire said, disappointment in his voice. "But he's riding like he

aims to get somewhere in a hurry."

"And by the time we get horses and saddle up there won't be much chance of catching that hombre," Dismal said sadly.

"Figure we should do something about it," said Gilford. "But what?"

"There's just one thing to do, Sheriff," Solitaire said quickly, "and that's not wait for morning. Let's round up every man we can get tonight and be ready for trouble."

"Something to what you say," said the sheriff.
"How do we go about rounding up folks to helps us?"

"Send one of your deputies to the Triangle and another to Tom Young's ranch," Solitaire said. "Have 'em warn the outfits to be ready for more trouble."

"All right," Gilford said. "I'll do it."

"I'll wake up every man here in town I think can be trusted," said Shadwell. He looked at Solitaire and Dismal. "What are you two going to do?"

"Get our horses and head for Vance Rand's spread," said Solitaire. "Since the Rolling R must be the headquarters of the Horseshoe Bunch, we'll keep watch there, and be ready to ride and warn the town if the raiders head this way."

"Oh, sure," Dismal said wearily. "Just a couple of Paul Reveres, that's us. But come on, Solitaire, let's get going."

The four men separated, the sheriff heading for his office to give orders to his deputies, Shadwell to rouse the townsmen he trusted, and Solitaire and Dismal hurrying to the livery stable for their horses.

The stable was locked, and when they pounded on the door there was no answer. Solitaire knocked louder and then looked at Dismal.

"Craig doesn't seem to be here," he said. "Wonder if he was the hombre we saw riding away?"

"Might have been," Dismal said thoughtfully. "It also might have been Ward Barlow or Ace Tyler. They both seemed right anxious to get away before the rest of us left Shadwell's office."

"I don't figure it was Barlow," Solitaire said.

"Now what?" demanded Dismal. "Looks like this is a case of the stable being locked before the horses were stolen."

"Let's try that back door," suggested Solitaire.

"Now why couldn't I think of a simple thing like that?" said Dismal.

CHAPTER XVII

The two trail partners hurried around to the rear of the stable. The back door was closed, but apparently Craig had forgotten to lock it, for it opened easily. Solitaire went inside, with Dismal tagging after him.

"Nobody here but just us horses," said Dismal, his voice echoing hollowly. "And I don't like the sound of my voice."

"Then keep still," Solitaire said impatiently. "Saddle up."

He found that he was tired, and it made him quicktempered.

Solitaire and Dismal got the pinto and the roan out of the stalls and quickly saddled them, and led the horses out through the back door. Dismal closed the door, and the two men swung into the saddles.

"Where's the Rolling R, anyway?" Dismal asked.

"Over in the eastern end of the valley," Solitaire said. "I don't know how far."

They rode around the stable and into the street.

Most of the houses and other buildings were dark now, but there was still a light in the sheriff's office.

Solitaire and Dismal rode to the lower end of the street and on along the road beyond the town. Deerhorn was a quarter of a mile behind them when abruptly a rider loomed out of the shadows beneath a big tree. His gun covered the two men even as they saw him appear. They were not foolish enough to reach for their own guns.

"Going some place special?" demanded Mark Lucan, the snarl of an old wolf in his voice.

"What's the idea, Lucan?" Solitaire asked impatiently. "Why the gun?"

"Figured the valley woul be safer if you two weren't around," growled the Triangle foreman. "So I rode to town looking for you. Heard horses coming this way, so I waited back under the tree to see who was riding along the road, and it was you two. Ain't I lucky?"

"Maybe you think so," Dismal said dryly. "Me, I figure you're right unfortunate. There are two of us, and even if you shot one the other would get you before you could down him."

It was obvious that the strange, bitter hatred he had felt toward Solitaire Stevens and Dismal Day since he had first met them was still with the foreman of the Triangle.

"That's what you think!" Lucan snarled. He aimed his gun at Dismal, his eyes gleaming with a wild killer light. The little ranny touched the roan with the spurs just as the foreman's Colt roared. The horse leaped to one side, and the bullet missed Dismal's head by a good foot.

Solitaire's gun flashed up and roared. Lucan reeled back in his saddle as the bullet struck him in the chest. He grabbed blindly for the horn but missed it, his gun dropping from his fingers. His hands clawed at empty air as his feet kicked out of the stirrups, and he slid to the road in a grotesque heap, to sprawl there lifeless.

"We warned him," Dismal said grimly. "We told him if he kept pestering us he'd stop a bullet. There was a jasper who could only take lead for an answer."

"I know," Solitaire said.

Again the bleak mood swept over him. He had to shoot to kill, for there had only been one thought in Mark Lucan's mind and that was to shoot down the two men he had hated. Yet in Solitaire's estimation the whole thing had been senseless upon Lucan's part.

Solitaire thrust his gun back into the holster and swung out of the saddle, dropping his reins. The cool breeze of the lonely night touched his face with ghost fingers as he walked over to the still form huddled there in the dust and mud at the side of the road. He again saw Gail watching and waiting, the fright in the lovely hazel eyes, and he knew he was not the man for her.

It took only a few moments for him to make certain that Lucan was actually dead. The foreman's mount had wandered over to the side of the road, and it stood there waiting, looming big and strangely lonely in the shadows.

"What now?" Dismal asked as he sat in the saddle watching. "We still heading for the Rolling R, Solitaire?"

Dismal's words were so matter-of-fact that they snapped Solitaire out of his bleak mood.

"We are," Solitaire said.

He picked up the body and carried it over and placed it gently on the grass at the side of the road. Then he went to Lucan's horse. He picked up the reins and tied them loosely to the saddle horn. He gave the animal a slap on the flank, and the sorrel trotted away, heading home toward the Triangle.

"When Lucan's horse gets back to the ranch the Triangle outfit will know there's something wrong and start looking for the foreman," Solitaire said as he returned to his pinto, picked up the reins and swung into the saddle. "Strike you strange that Lucan should duck out of sight when he heard horses coming along the road, Dismal?"

"It does now," said Dismal as they rode on, "though I hadn't thought of it before. He said he was riding to town looking for us. Now just why would he figure that we might come riding along the road at this time of night?"

"He didn't know who was coming when he ducked out of sight beneath that big tree," said Solitaire. "The rider who left town in such a hurry a little while ago came this way."

"Shucks, you don't think that Lucan was the man

who rode out of town?"

"No, but I think that man met Lucan," said Solitaire. "I'm betting that Lucan was waiting beside the road to stop anyone who chased after the hombre who left town. Lucan said he was lucky when we happened to show up."

"If that was lucky for him, I want to be plumb unfortunate from now on," said Dismal. "Anyway, he sure won't be telling Adam Norton what to do any longer. Whether Norton will be grateful for that

or not is a pink horse of another color."

"Wonder if Lucan was a member of the Horseshoe Bunch?" said Solitaire. "Seems like he might have been." Solitaire frowned as the two riders left the road and headed across the rangeland toward the eastern end of the valley. "There's one thing that still puzzles me, Dismal."

"Just one thing?" Dismal asked. "I can think of six or eight without even bothering to count. But what

do you mean?"

"What does the Horseshoe Bunch hope to gain by raiding the spreads around here and trying to clean them out?" Solitaire said thoughtfully. "We know now that Slash Lawson isn't the boss of the raiders, and he hasn't been doing it all with some crazy idea of getting revenge on the men who tried to lynch him that night last fall."

"True," said Dismal. "Vance Rand appears to have been sort of second in command in the Horseshoe Bunch. He must have figured on gaining something out of it. The late Mr. Rand didn't strike me as a feller who would work for peanuts. Come to think of it, I've never run across anyone who would."

"From all we've heard, the Rolling R is a sort of run-down spread," Solitaire said. "Maybe Rand wanted to be a cattle king the easy way."

"How do you do that?" asked Dismal. "Maybe I might want to try it when I decide to settle down in my old age."

"It's very simple," Solitaire said dryly. "First you gather up a bunch of gunslicks and outlaws. Then you find a place like this valley and try to wipe out all the ranchers here so that you can buy up their spreads cheap. Of course if said ranchers get mad enough, you are likely to get killed doing it."

"Thank you most to death," said Dismal. "But that sounds like too much work. I'd rather be poor but healthy." He changed the subject abruptly. "You know sometimes the darndest things worry me."

"Such as what?" asked Solitaire.

"That paper you picked up in front of the livery stable before we headed for Shadwell's office, for instance." "I'd forgotten all about it," said Solitaire, reining the pinto to a halt as Dismal also stopped the roan. "Let's take a look at it right now."

He drew the paper out of his pocket and unfolded it and examined it in the light of a match.

"This appears to be a map of the valley," Solitaire said. "Here's Deerhorn, and Red Gulch and the four ranches." The match burned out and he struck another one. "And here's where the railroad spur might go if they ran a line into the valley. It crosses all three ranches, the ones belonging to King, Norton and Young. Doesn't go near the Rolling R."

"Looks like somebody sure has a lot of faith in railroads," said Dismal.

"That's the reason the Horseshoe Bunch are riding," said Solitaire as he folded the map and thrust it into the top of one of his boots. "The leader of the band is plumb certain the railroad is coming into the valley and aims to cash in on it when it does."

"Nice idea," said Dismal. "If he lives that long."

They lapsed into silence as they again rode on. The skies had cleared and the stars gleamed high above the two horsemen. They were too experienced to ride fast, for they did not know just how far they might have to go to reach the Rolling R. There had been no indication on the map as to the exact distance between the ranches and the towns. Even though they had had some rest, the pinto and the roan had been ridden quite a lot tonight.

Ahead loomed a stretch of rocky terrain, with huge boulders that looked like strange prehistoric monsters in the starlight scattered about smaller rocks. Solitaire rode slumped down in the saddle. He found that he was so tired that he did not even feel like whistling. It had been a long, hard day and a hectic night.

They rode through an opening between two big rocks that loomed higher than the mounted men. Out of the shadows behind the boulders suddenly appeared six horsemen, bandanna masks hiding the lower part of their faces and guns ready in their hands. They did not speak, but there was menace in the way they spread out as they rode forward.

"We've got company," Dismal said sadly.

Neither Solitaire nor Dismal made any attempt to reach for their guns. They knew the six masked men could blast them down before they even got the Colts out of their holsters.

Silently the six horsemen surrounded them, and there was something sinister about the continued silence. Solitaire and Dismal halted their mounts and sat in the saddles waiting.

One masked man reached out and snatched Dismal's gun from the holster. Another, who had edged his horse close to Solitaire, took the latter's gun.

"Come on," said one of the men. "Let's take these two to the ranch. The big boss will probably be right interested in seeing them, and he's there now." "All right," said another masked man. "Let's go." Escorting Solitaire and Dismal in the center of the group, they headed their horses eastward.

Within half an hour the eight riders had reached the eastern end of Pine Tree Valley. Ahead loomed the buildings of a ranch, and Solitaire realized they had reached Vance Rand's Rolling R. He saw that it was a small spread and looked very run down.

He noticed that there were quite a few horses in the cavvy corral, more than an outfit working on a ranch of this size would need for their strings. Lights gleamed through the windows of the ranchhouse and the bunkhouse—yellow squares in the shadows.

"You folks sure keep late hours," said Dismal as he also looked the ranch over. "By this time an honest cow outfit would all be sound asleep."

"Good thing you won't live long enough for us to regret what you're saying, Day," said one of the masked men.

The riders reached the front of the ranchhouse and halted their horses. Two hard-faced men stepped out through the open front door.

"What have you boys got?" asked one of the men on the porch.

"Couple of prisoners," answered one of the masked men as he swung out of the saddle and handed his horse's reins to a man near him. "Solitaire Stevens and Dismal Day."

"Oh, them," said the man who had asked the

question.

"That's not the way he should have done it," Dismal said sadly. "He should have repeated our names in a proper tone of awe."

"The big boss here?" asked the man who had dismounted.

"Yeah," said the man on the porch. "I'll see if he wants you to bring the prisoners in."

He turned and went back into the house, and the other man on the porch silently followed.

"My horse is plumb tired of me," said Dismal. "So if you masked marvels don't mind, I'd like to climb out of this saddle."

"Go ahead," said the masked man who had been on Solitaire's left as he also dismounted. "Nobody is stopping you."

Dismal and Solitaire swung out of their saddles, dropping their reins. In the dim light Dismal bumped against the masked man standing near him and then stepped quickly away, fumbling with the front of his flannel shirt.

The horses that were bunched just beyond the porch stirred restlessly. Solitaire stood waiting, with Dismal close beside him. He was conscious of the masked men all around them: four of the gunslicks still sitting stolidly in their saddles, and two of them standing near the steps.

A figure loomed in the open doorway. His voice harsh and yet impersonal, broke the silence.

"The boss says to bring the prisoners in," he said.
"Just a couple of you come with them. The rest of you saddle up fresh horses and be ready to ride with the bunch. We're leaving soon."

"Leaving for where?" asked one of the masked men who stood near the steps.

"For Deerhorn," said the man at the door. "The boss has figured out a way to make the folks in town sit up and talk turkey."

"Gobble, gobble," said Dismal softly.

Heads turned in his direction, eyes glared at him from between lowered hat brims and drawn up neckerchiefs. The little cowboy sighed.

"They are not amused," Dismal said mournfully.

"Bring 'em in," said the man at the door. "Get a move on. The boss is waiting."

"Get going," said the nearest masked man.

Solitaire started up the steps of the porch, and Dismal was close behind him. The boards that formed the treads creaked beneath their boots. Idly Solitaire found himself thinking that whoever had built this ranchhouse had not been a very good carpenter.

They crossed the porch, two masked men following them. The rest of the men in front of the house rode away, leading the horses of the two prisoners, and heading toward the cavvy corral. The man in the doorway stepped back and stood watching as Solitaire and Dismal entered the hall with the two masked men behind them.

Back to the left along the hall a door stood half open. Solitaire walked toward it, the others following. When he reached the door he halted and stood staring into the ranchhouse living room.

A handsome dark-haired man sat at a flat desk, the light from an oil lamp gleaming on his dark coat, white shirt and string tie. His hands were hidden beneath the desk as if one of them might be holding a gun.

"Ace Tyler," said Dismal as he also peered into the room. "So he's the real leader of the Horseshoe Bunch!"

CHAPTER XVIII

"I'm beginning to realize why you warned us it might be safer if we left town, Tyler," Solitaire said, contempt in his voice as he glared at the gambler. "Maybe you felt you would be a lot freer if we were out of the valley."

"Not exactly," Tyler said in a strangely tired voice. "Maybe I just warned you for your own good." He glared at the two men who stood behind Solitaire and Dismal just inside the door. "Get out! Must I always have all of you watching and listening when I talk?"

"He's right," said the masked man on the gambler's right in a queer whispering voice. He looked at the tall man who had been on the porch and had now joined the other two in the doorway. He was not masked. "You have your orders, Crawford. You're in charge of the Deerhorn business, you and the bunch get riding."

"That's right, " snapped Tyler. "Get going!"
"All right Boss," Crawford said.

He turned and left, and the two masked men who had brought Solitaire and Dismal into the house followed him. The prisoners were left alone with Tyler and the two masked men with rifles.

"I'm sure sorry about this, Ace," Dismal said.
"Looks like Gail Dabney has been showing too much interest in the wrong man."

"Let's keep Miss Dabney's name out of this, Day," Tyler said coldly.

"He's right, Dismal," Solitaire said quietly.
"And I'm not certain that the young lady has made a mistake."

Deliberately Solitaire stepped toward the desk. He found himself covered by the rifle of the masked man with the whispering voice.

"That's far enough," the man whispered.

"I thought it would be," Solitaire said cryptically.
"I just wanted to make sure."

"Sure of what?" demanded Dismal impatiently. "If you ask me, this is no time to be talking riddles, Solitaire."

"You got here in a hurry tonight, Ace," Solitaire said, his tone friendly. "You must have left town just a few minutes before we did."

"Then Tyler was the feller we heard riding out of town in a hurry," Dismal said.

"I had to ride fast when I found out she—" Tyler broke off with a frown.

"You talk too much, Boss," came from the whis-

pering man. "Much too much. I don't like it. It could be dangerous for us all."

From outside Solitaire heard the thudding of many horses hoofs, and he realized that the Horseshoe Bunch was heading for Deerhorn. A sense of futility swept over him as he remembered that he and Dismal had promised to warn the men of the town if raiders were coming. As he listened the hoofbeats gradually grew fainter and then died away in the distance. A cool breeze blew in through an open window not far from the desk.

"Put your hands on the desk top, Ace," Solitaire said. "You make me kind of nervous keeping them hidden like that. You might be holding a gun."

"But I'm not." Tyler lifted his arms. His wrists were tightly bound with rope. "You see."

"You fool;" snarled the whispering man, rising swiftly to his feet. "I warned you! I told you what would happen to the girl if you didn't play this my way, Tyler!"

"Just what I thought," Solitaire said, staring at the gambler's bound wrists. "You struck me as a man of brains, Ace. If you really had been the leader of the Horseshoe Bunch, you wouldn't have appeared before us, and before your men, unmasked."

No one paid any attention to Dismal as he stood a little behind the others. He reached inside his shirt, and when his hand came out he was holding a six-gun. "Drop those rifles!" he snapped.

The two masked men turned to face Dismal, and saw the gun in his hand and the expression on his face that left no doubt he meant just what he had said. The silent one of the masked men let his rifle drop to the floor. The other man moved fast, swinging the barrel of his rifle around so that it hit the lamp on the desk and sent it crashing to the floor. The lamp went out, plunging the room into darkness.

Solitaire dropped to the floor as there came a blast of gunfire. The two masked men were using their six-guns. Dismal's gun roared. There was a gasp, and then the heavy thud of a falling body. Solitaire heard the smaller sound of a gun as it also hit the floor close to him. He fumbled around, found the gun and grabbed it.

He got to his feet just as a shadowy figure leaped out through the open window. Dismal fired at the fleeing man but missed. There was the sound of running feet outside, and then a few moments later the hoofbeats of a horse galloping away.

"That was the leader of the Horseshoe Bunch," came Tyler's voice out of the darkness. "And he's getting away."

"He sure is," said Dismal. "And I don't figure we can stop him unless we suddenly sprout wings, which isn't likely." A thought struck him. "Speak to me, Solitaire. Tell me you're not dead."

"All right," said Solitaire. "I'm not dead."

He stepped out into the hall, got an oil lamp that was burning there and brought it into the living room. He still had the gun in his free hand. He dropped it into the empty holster on his right leg.

"Where did you get a gun, Dismal?" he asked, staring at the body of a man in a mask that was sprawled near the window.

"Remember when we got off our horses and I bumped into the masked hombre who had taken my gun away from me?" said Dismal. "Well, I took it back again, which was easy, me being light-fingered and him being dumb."

Solitaire put the lamp down on the desk. He drew out a jackknife and cut the ropes that bound Ace Tyler's wrists.

"So they kidnaped Gail," Solitaire said. "Which was why you headed for the Rolling R in such a hurry, Ace."

"That's right," said Tyler, rubbing his wrists first with one hand and then the other, for the flesh was raw from the tight rope. "I discovered Gail was missing soon as I got back to the hotel after leaving Shadwell's office tonight, and so I headed here. But I was a fool. They caught me as I was sneaking around this place. When he learned that you two had been brought in as prisoners, the Boss insisted that I take his place and act like I was running the gang. He said if I didn't do it, then I would never again see Gail alive."

"You sure fooled me," Dismal said as he walked over and examined the man by the window. "But then I'm right easy to convince."

"Who is the leader of the Horseshoe Bunch?" Solitaire asked, looking at the gambler. "Did he say

or do anything that gave it away, Ace?"

"Nothing," Tyler said thoughtfully. "At least nothing that makes me certain of his identity. He must be someone we all know well enough for him to be afraid his normal voice would be recognized. That whispering stuff was just an act, of course."

"I don't know this hombre," said Dismal as he removed the mask and stared at the hard face of the man he had shot and killed. "Just one of the gang, I reckon."

A hush lingered over the ranch now. Solitaire found that their voices seemed strangely loud as the three men talked there in the living room.

Dismal walked over to a cabinet standing against the wall and pulled open the doors. He blinked as he saw the guns and rifles inside.

"Look what Santa Claus brought us, and it isn't even Christmas," Dismal said.

"I could use an extra gun," said Solitaire, stepping over to the cabinet and selecting a long-barreled .45. "Fully loaded, too." He dropped the gun into the holster on his left hip.

"They took my gun," Tyler said. He picked up a .38, examined it, and then thrust it into the shoulder

holster he wore beneath his black coat. "I feel much better now, thank you."

"And I didn't even know you were sick, Ace," Dismal joked.

The gambler smiled as he saw that Dismal and Solitaire were grinning at him. The old impassiveness returned to Ace Tyler's face.

"We're wasting time," he said, sudden impatience in his voice. "I've got a feeling that Gail might be a prisoner somewhere in this house."

In the silence there came the sound of a woman sobbing. Dismal listened for an instant, then looked at Tyler and shook his head.

"Never heard mice cry like that," Dismal said. "When you start guessing you do it right good, Ace."

Solitaire and Tyler paid no attention to Dismal. They had more important things on their mind as they headed for the hall, moving fast. Dismal trailed after them.

"That was a woman crying," Tyler said, as the three men reached the hall. "And I think the sound came from the second floor of the house."

"So do I," said Solitaire. "We better go see."

"Not the brightest bit of conversation I ever heard," said Dismal from behind them, "but you've got the right idea."

They went back along the hall. Tyler led the way up the stairs to the second floor of the ranchhouse, with Solitaire and Dismal following him. The sob-

bing had ceased and the house was again quiet, but it was an uneasy sort of stillness.

There was an oil lamp resting on a table near the head of the stairs. Back along the hall, beyond the reach of the yellow glow, the shadows grew denser. But here a door stood open and light came from the room beyond.

The three men went to the door and peered into a bedroom. Gail Dabney was lying on a bed, bound hand and foot, her face turned toward the door. She was wearing a brown dress, her dark hair was mussed, and her cheeks were still wet as if she had been crying.

The sadness in her lovely face gave way to an expression of amazement and then relief as she recognized the three men standing in the doorway.

As he gazed at her Solitaire felt the old loneliness sweep over him. Gail smiled at him as she would at an old friend, but the hazel eyes filled with adoration as she gazed at the tall gambler.

"Ace!" she said, and her words were only for him. "I've been so frightened and unhappy. One of those terrible masked men told me that you were dead! He made it sound so convincing that I believed him."

"I'm not dead, darling," Tyler said as he entered the room and walked over to the bed. "I'm very much alive."

Solitaire handed Tyler his knife, and the gambler cut the ropes that bound Gail's wrists and ankles.

When she had been released Gail sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed.

"How did you two get here?" she asked, looking at Solitaire and Dismal.

"The Horseshoe Bunch have been right busy tonight collecting prisoners," Solitaire said with a smile. "But they overdid it when they captured us. Dismal managed to get hold of a gun."

"And when that happens I just don't know my own strength," said Dismal. "I'm likely to shoot folks plumb regardless."

"How did they happen to kidnap you, Gail?" Tyler asked.

"I stepped out in back of the hotel for a breath of air," Gail said. "Then two masked men gabbed me. It was fairly early in the evening. They tied and gagged me and then placed me on some blankets in the back of a buckboard they had waiting behind the buildings. Then they brought me here to this ranch." She shuddered. "The waiting, not knowing what might happen, has been terrible."

"You know I've got a feeling we better get out of here," Dismal said uneasily. "There's something about this place I don't like, and I figure it's the folks who live here."

"Dismal is right," Solitaire said with a frown. "The leader of the Horseshoe Bunch got away. He might have found some of his men by this time and sent them back here to get us."

Downstairs, a door slammed. The three men looked at each other and then at Gail. They were suddenly tense and wary, and there was a frightened expression on her face.

"What was that?" she demanded anxiously.

"A door slammed downstairs," Solitaire said, trying to make his tone casual. "It might have been the wind."

"Unhuh," said Dismal. "You hope!"

Solitaire stepped out into the hall and went to the head of the stairs. He peered down. The oil lamp in the lower hall was no longer burning. There was something strange and sinister about the darkness that now shrouded the lower floor of the ranchhouse.

"Just in case you've forgotten, there's a lamp burning right beside you," Dismal said from behind Solitaire. "And you make a right good target standing there, Solitaire."

From the darkness below a gun roared. The bullet seemed to pluck at Solitaire's left shoulder as it passed. Dismal stepped over and calmly blew out the oil lamp burning on the table.

"See what I mean," he whispered in the darkness of the hall.

Solitaire had his gun drawn. He fired three shots into the darkness at the foot of the stairs. He didn't hope to hit anyone, but at least he would warn whoever was down below that those on the second floor of the house were ready for trouble.

"What's wrong?" Tyler demanded as he appeared in the open doorway of the still lighted bedroom. "What are you shooting at?"

"Somebody fired at Solitaire from downstairs," answered Dismal. "He's just convincing them we can play, too."

Solitaire dropped his right-hand gun back into the holster, after expertly reloading it in the dark. He moved over against the wall at the right side of the stairs. From below he heard what sounded like water being splashed around. Then suddenly a red glow appeared.

"Good Lord!" Solitaire exclaimed. "Whoever is downstairs has splashed kerosene from the lamps around and set the place on fire!"

"We're trapped unless we can find a way to get out of here in a hurry," said Dismal anxiously. "What had we better do?"

"Knot the ends of all the bedclothes you can find together and try to make a rope," ordered Solitaire. "With that we may be able to slide down to the ground through a window."

CHAPTER XIX

Ace Tyler disappeared into the bedroom, and Solitaire knew that the gambler had gone to carry out the order. On the lower floor of the ranchhouse the fire was quickly spreading as the flames licked eagerly at the oil-soaked walls, floors and furniture. It caught on the foot of the stairs and began creeping upward.

Solitaire and Dismal hurried into the bedroom. Ace and Gail had tied the ends of two sheets together and were knotting a blanket to the end of one of the sheets.

Quickly Solitaire went to the nearest window, opened it and peered out. He found that the bedroom faced out on the side of the ranchhouse and it was a sheer drop of at least thirty feet to the ground.

"Pull the bed over to the window," Solitaire said.
"We'll tie the rope to the foot of the bed, and then see how far it will reach."

Solitaire and Dismal shoved the heavy old-fashioned iron bed over close to the window. The two sheets and the blanket were all the bedclothes there had

been in the room.

Tyler fastened one end of the improvised rope to the foot of the bed, and then Dismal dropped the rest of the rope out of the window. It hung about six or seven feet above the ground.

Outside the door of the room they could hear the roar of the fire, and the heat was growing more and more intense. Smoke blew into the room, choking them and making them cough. From below there came a loud crash as burning timber gave way.

"I'm the heaviest," Solitaire said hoarsely. "I'll slide down the rope first and make sure it will hold the rest of you."

He swung out over the window sill, caught the sheet and blanket rope with both hands and gradually began sliding down. He was halfway down when he glimped a shadowy figure that suddenly appeared at the front corner of the house. A gun roared and a bullet whistled by Solitaire's head, much too close for comfort.

He clung to the rope with one hand and wound his long legs around it. With his free hand he drew his gun and fired at the figure. The man uttered a howl and then disappeared, running with a limping gait as if he had been wounded in the leg.

Solitaire dropped his gun back into the holster, slid down to the end of the bedclothes rope and then dropped. He landed on his feet. Up above he saw Gail swing onto the rope and start sliding down.

He waited, and when Gail reached the end of the rope and dropped he caught her in his arms. For an instant he held her tight, conscious of the softness of her slender body pressed against his own, and then he placed her so that she was standing on the ground.

Tyler came next, and Dismal followed the gambler down. Solitaire left them and made a quick circle of the house, gun in hand. He saw no one. Apparently only one man had returned and set fire to the place, and now he had left. Solitaire suspected that it had been the chief of the Horseshoe Bunch who had come back in the hope of getting the escaped prisoners at the ranchhouse.

Solitaire returned to the spot where Gail, Dismal and Tyler were waiting. The entire ranchhouse was a mass of flames now. Even the bedclothes rope caught fire and dropped to the ground.

"Looks like we got out of that house just in time," said Dismal, staring at the flames. "You find anyone, Solitaire?"

"No one," said Solitaire. "Whoever set fire to the house got away, but I think I wounded him in the leg. If I did, then he couldn't run far, so I guess he must have had a horse ready close by."

"Speaking of horses," said Dismal, "there are some of them over there in the cavvy corral. And there should be saddles and stuff in the harness shed."

"Then let's saddle up and get out of here," said Tyler. They headed for the harness shed, which was far enough from the house not to be in any danger of catching fire. Here they found saddles, bridle blankets and the rest of the rigging. When they reached the cavvy corral Dismal uttered a startled exclamation.

"There's your pinto and my roan in there, Solitaire," he said, "all saddled and ready just like we left them."

They roped and saddled a horse for Ace Tyler and one for Gail. The girl swung into the saddle a bit awkwardly because of the skirt she wore, which rose above her knees. The gambler also mounted his horse, and Solitaire and Dismal swung into the saddles of the pinto and roan.

"Let's go," said Dismal.

They rode out through the corral gate and fastened it behind them. The flaming roof of the ranchhouse gave way with a roar that made the horses jump and head away from there in a hurry. The four riders were willing to let the animals run.

After they had raced a mile or two in the direction of Deerhorn, the horses slowed down to a steady trot. Dismal and Solitaire rode in the lead, with Gail and Tyler trailing close behind them.

"What time is it?" Dismal finally asked.

"Around two or three in the morning," Solitaire said. "At a guess. I'm not going to try and look at my watch."

They rode on in silence.

Within an hour they found themselves on the road that led to the little cowtown. They had encountered no one during the course of their journey; the rangeland seemed strangely quiet.

As they drew nearer they found that the buildings of Deerhorn were dark and there was no sign of any excitement in the town.

"That's strange," said Dismal. "From the way they talked I was plumb certain that the Horseshoe Bunch planned to raid the town tonight and try and wipe everybody out."

"I thought so, too," Solitaire said.

"Maybe they did," said Dismal, "and there's nobody left alive but just us."

"Nice gruesome thought," said Solitaire dryly. "But I don't believe it."

"Neither do I," said Gail as she and Tyler rode close behind Solitaire and Dismal. "There are still a few lights burning in the hotel."

They rode on along the dark, deserted street and halted their mounts at the hitch-rail in front of the hotel. Tyler dismounted and helped Gail out of the saddle. Solitaire and Dismal swung down and tied the reins of all four horses to the rail.

"Something wrong about this," Dismal said in a low tone. "But I can't figure out what it is yet."

"I fell the same way that you do," said Solitaire. "But I don't know why either."

They followed Gail and Tyler into the hotel

lobby. Here oil lamps that had been turned down burned dimly. The night clerk was still behind the desk, and he looked unhappy. Reece Shadwell sat in a chair, and there was an air of dejection about the stout saloon owner. It gave way to an expression of relief as he saw the three men and the girl.

"So you got through," Shadwell said, as he lumbered to his feet. "They let you in."

"What do you mean?" Solitaire demanded with a puzzled frown. "What are you talking about, Reece?"

"The Horseshoe Bunch have the town completely surrounded," Shadwell said. "It has been that way for the past two or three hours. They are hidden out there in the shadows, lots of them armed with rifles. They've been letting folks into town, but anyone who tries to leave is shot and killed."

"I knew there was something wrong with this town," Dismal said grimly. "And I was sure right."

"Has anyone tried to leave, Reece?" Solitaire asked.

"Three men tried it during the last hour or so," said Shadwell. "They all died." The stout man scowled. "We took them to the undertaker's. No one has tried to leave since then."

"I sure don't aim to try it," said Dismal. "All of a sudden you'd be surprised at how fond I've grown of staying in this town!"

After discussing the situation further with Shadwell, it was decided that the new arrivals were safe enough in the hotel, for the time being at least. Gail announced that she was going up to her room and freshen up. She left the four men still talking, hurried up the stairs and disappeared.

Shadwell, Tyler, Solitaire and Dismal dropped into

chairs.

"Who is in town now, Reece?" Solitaire asked.

"Just about everybody who lives here," Shadwell said. "The sheriff, Ward Barlow, Sam Craig, the rest of the local citizens, and a few men from the ranches who were still in town."

"This bunch who are stationed all around the town make no attempt to down anyone who steps out onto the street?" Solitaire asked.

"Not yet," said Shadwell, "though there is no tell-

ing when they may start doing that."

"What had we better do?" Dismal asked. "If we could reach Adam Norton and Tom Young and get them to head for town with their outfits, they might be able to drive the Horseshoe Bunch away from Deerhorn."

"Of course," said Shadwell. "But how can we hope to do that? Anyone who tries to leave town will be killed. If anybody from the ranches ride into town they will be allowed to get in just as you four were a little while ago. So they won't know there's anything wrong until it's too late to do anything about it."

"Seems to me the only sensible thing to do is wait until daylight," said Solitaire. "That will give us a

better chance to pick off the men surrounding the town."

"You're right, Solitaire," Shadwell said, and then he yawned. "There's nothing we can do now. I'm going to bed and try and get some sleep."

"That's an idea that I like," said Dismal. "Can't remember when I've felt quite so tired and sleepy."

"So am I," said Solitaire. "But there's still one thing we've got to do before we can turn in, Dismal. Don't forget that we left our horses and the ones that Tyler and Gail rode into town out in front of the hotel."

"That's right," said Tyler. "What about them?"

"Dismal and I will take the horses to the livery stable and turn them over to Sam Craig," said Solitaire. "You don't need to bother about them, Ace."

"Thanks, Solitaire," said the gambler, as the four men got to their feet and headed for the front door of the hotel.

Solitaire and Dismal unfastened their reins from the hitch-rail and swung into their saddles. Tyler and Shadwell handed them the reins of the other two horses. Then the trail partners rode down the street to the livery stable.

To their surprise, Sam Craig was sitting in his chair in front of the stable smoking his pipe. The old stable keeper blinked when he saw Solitaire and Dismal and the two led horses.

"Don't tell me that you two have come back again,"

said Craig without moving. "I must still be having nightmares."

"Think nothing of it," said Dismal. "You just open the door so that we can take these horses inside and pretend that you dreamed the whole thing, Sam."

"All right," Craig said resignedly.

He got slowly to his feet, limped to the small door and disappeared through it. In a few moments the big door rolled open, Solitaire and Dismal rode in with the four horses and swung out of their saddles. There was a lantern burning dimly in the stable, and the men and horses cast long, eerie shadows in the yellow light.

"Leave the horses standing there ground-hitched," said Craig. "I'll unsaddle them and put them away. You two run along. I'm plumb tired of the sight of you."

"Suits me," said Solitaire. "Come on, Dismal."

They left the stable and headed back toward the hotel along the dark and deserted street.

"You know Shadwell forgot something when he said that everyone was here in town," said Solitaire. "At least I hope he did."

"What do you mean?" asked Dismal in surprise.

"Before we left town the last time to head for the Rolling R. Sheriff Gilford said he was going to send his three deputies to the other ranches and warn them to have their outfits ready for trouble."

"That's right," said Dismal. "And when nothing

happens at the ranches, at least nothing more than has happened, Norton and Young are likely to gather up their outfits and head for town to see what's going on here."

"Exactly," said Solitaire. "Which should make things right interesting."

They walked on in silence. They had almost reached the hotel when a tall figure loomed out of the shadows and stood on the plank walk in front of them. Solitaire and Dismal instantly covered him with their guns.

"Who are you?" Sheriff Matt Gilford demanded petulantly as he peered at them.

"Stevens and Day," said Solitaire.

"That's right," said Dismal. "And you jump out at folks without warning very often and you're likely to get shot, Matt."

"Where did you two come from?" asked the sheriff.

"You mean now, or during the last few hours?" asked Dismal. "Never mind answering that. We just came from the livery stable where we left our horses."

Solitaire and Dismal dropped their guns back into the holsters. Gilford stood peering at them.

"You know that the Horseshoe Bunch has the town surrounded," the sheriff said finally.

"We know, Matt," said Solitaire. "Reece Shadwell told us as soon as we got back to town with Gail and Tyler."

"I've never been through anything like this be-

fore," said Gilford, and he sounded like a tired and beaten man. "My deputies aren't even here, and I don't know just what to do."

"Then you did send your deputies to warn the ranchers," said Solitaire, relief sweeping over him. "I was right about that."

"Sent them hours ago," said the sheriff. "Hope they got there all right. How about coming to my office and telling me what's happened to you two since I last saw you after we left Shadwell's office?"

"All right," said Solitaire. "Let's do that."

"We just never will get any sleep," said Dismal. "But I'm beginning to lose interest in that idea anyway. Maybe I'm a night owl and just never knew it until now."

CHAPTER XX

The three men went to the sheriff's office. After they were inside Gilford closed and locked the door and then drew down the blinds. He lighted an oil lamp and seated himself at his desk and motioned Solitaire and Dismal to a couple of chairs.

"Now what happened?" the sheriff asked.

Quickly and briefly Solitaire told Gilford, then asked, "What's the matter with you and the rest of the men in this town, Sheriff?"

"What do you mean?" asked Gilford in surprise.

"A bunch of gunslicks surround the town," said Solitaire. "They pick off three men who try to leave, and all of you are plumb certain that there is nothing you can do about it. You just sit around and think the whole thing is terrible."

"What should we do?" There was a defiant note in the sheriff's voice. "Maybe you can tell me that!"

"I can," Solitaire said firmly. "In an hour or so it will be daylight. If you're smart you'll station men with rifles on the roofs of the buildings all up and down the street. When it gets light those men should

be able to make it right hot for the bunch of sidewinders who have this town surrounded."

"You've got something there!" Gilford leaped to his feet excitedly.

"Come on, let's get busy on this."

Quietly they went from building to building along the street, arousing the local citizens and telling them what was to be done. No one argued against the plan, and soon there were men with rifles stationed on the roofs all up and down the street. There were trapdoors in many of the roofs, and the men had managed to get up there without being seen by the outlaws who had the town surrounded.

Solitaire, Dismal and the sheriff had separated, knowing they could do the job quicker that way. When the three of them had finished their mission they met in front of the hotel.

"We're ready now," said the sheriff. "Wasn't able to find Reece Shadwell though, and Ward Barlow seemed kind of annoyed that we hadn't asked his advice before carrying out the plan."

"There's a man who gets mad if you say good morning to him," said Dismal.

"You told everyone, Matt?" Solitaire asked.

"Sure did," said Gilford. "Sam Craig said he would be on guard on the roof of the livery stable."

"Listen!" said Dismal abruptly. "Horses coming from the upper end of town. Better get ready for trouble!" The thundering hoofs grew louder; then into the upper end of the street swept a band of masked horsemen. Some of them carried flaming torches.

"It's the Horseshoe Bunch!" shouted Solitaire, as Ace Tyler stepped out of the hotel and joined the three men. "Take cover, all of you!"

The four men ducked back into the shadows, guns ready in their hands. The masked horsemen came on down the street—at least thirty or forty of them—with six-guns and rifles ready. From the roof-tops the rifles of the citizens of the town began roaring, and the mouted men returned the fire.

With the roaring, flaming guns and the burning torches, it seemed to Solitaire like a scene from some man-made inferno. A horseman flung his flaming torch at the nearest building. It landed on the roof.

Solitaire and Dismal stepped out onto the plank walk in front of the hotel, guns blazing. Two men who rode in the lead of the raiders saw them and sent their horses dashing toward them. Solitaire's right-hand gun roared, and the nearer of the approaching riders reeled back in his saddle as the bullet struck him, then slid to the ground. Dismal downed the other man with a quick shot.

"That's two of 'em!" howled Dismal. "But it's a big bunch!"

For minutes that seemed like hours, the fighting was fast and furious. Masked men were milling around, sending plenty of lead flying at the men

stationed on the roofs, and other citizens of the town who had joined the fight from doors and windows along the street. But there were many empty saddles and wild riderless horses which made things difficut for the Horseshoe Bunch. The masked men were no longer fighting with the fury they had displayed when they had first come dashing down the street.

"We're winning!" shouted Solitaire as he sensed a turn in the tide of battle. "They're getting scared!"

"Unhuh," said Dismal, "and the way bullets are still flying around, I'm a little nervous myself."

Their backs against the front wall of the hotel, the sheriff and Ace Tyler were making their shots count, and Solitaire and Dismal found they had to stop to reload their guns.

By now the masked men were flinging away their torches, finding the hail of lead from both sides of the street too hot for them. Up at the far end of the street a small shack was a mass of flames, but that was the worst of the fire damage.

Then from the lower end of the street appeared another cavalcade of mounted men, a grim-faced bunch. They wore no masks, and all were in range clothes and heavily armed.

"The cattlemen!" shouted Solitaire as he saw the new arrivals heading up the street. "They sure got here in time!"

"Look, Solitaire!" said Dismal, watching a masked man who had been shouting orders ever since the fighting started. "That hombre on the gray horse must be the leader of the Horseshoe Bunch. He's heading this way!"

The masked man on the gray swung his mount toward Solitaire and Dismal as though he had recognized them and were determined to wipe them out if it was the last thing he ever did. His gun roared, and Solitaire felt the bullet gash his upper arm. Then his own gun blazed and the bullet hit the masked man somewhere in the upper part of his body.

"You got me!" he howled, dropping his gun, and clinging to the saddle horn with both hands. "Should have downed you two when I had the chance, and I've had plenty."

Out in the street the firing gradually died down. Deerhorn men, ranchers and waddies had won the battle. The raiders who were not dead or badly wounded were surrendering swiftly.

Sheriff Gilford and his three deputies went into action, assisted by the men of the town, and within a few minutes the streets was cleared, and twenty prisoners had been rushed to jail. The women of the town appeared and set up a sort of field hospital in the lobby of the hotel, working with the local doctor attending the wounded.

Solitaire and Dismal had dragged the wounded leader of the Horseshoe Bunch off his gray horse. They carried their prisoner in through the doors of the saloon. Reece Shadwell, Adam Norton, Tom

Young, Ace Tyler and some others were in the Flowing Cup.

"Who've you got there, Solitaire?" Shadwell asked,

staring at the man they had just brought in.

"Don't know yet," said Solitaire, for the wounded man was still wearing a mask. "But he's been bossing the raid, so he must be the big boss of the Horseshoe Bunch. I've got a good idea who he is, though. He limped at the wrong time tonight."

Hastily Solitaire and Dismal placed the wounded man on a long bench in one corner of the big room. A murmur ran through the crowd and they all began

edging closer.

"Take off his mask," said Dismal. "I'm just bursting with curiosity."

Solitaire removed the blue bandanna mask that hid the countenance of the wounded outlaw. Startled exclamations came from the men gathered around as the mule-like old face of Sam Craig was revealed. The livery stable owner was still conscious, and he glared balefully at the men surrounding him.

"Sam Craig!" exclaimed the sheriff in amazement. "You mean he was the leader of the Horseshoe Bunch? I don't believe it! He hasn't got brains enough!"

"That's what you think," Craig muttered weakly, a strange sort of pride creeping into his voice. "I had you all fooled. I've been the leader of the Horseshoe Bunch from the first. Slash Lawson was just my

segundo with the first outfit like Vance Rand was this time. That's why I went back that night last fall after Lawson was lynched. I wanted to make sure he was dead. When I found he was still alive I shot and buried him. Had to make sure he wouldn't talk."

"I've been wondering a lot about you, Craig," said Solitaire. "You've been like the dog in the detective story. You did nothing in the nighttime or daytime either but just hang around your stable. It didn't seem natural."

"I never thought of that," said Dismal. "But it seems I haven't been doing much thinking lately. You wounded the man we figured must be the leader of the Horseshoe Bunch tonight, Solitaire. And when Craig opened the door for us to put our horses away, he walked with a limp, and he never did that before."

"Right," said Solitaire. "I didn't think you noticed it, Dismal."

Reece Shadwell and Ward Barlow were among the listeners, as were Ace Tyler and the two ranch owners, their cowboys and the men of the town. The stout saloon owner nodded.

"That's it!" suddenly exclaimed Shadwell. "It was Craig who gave me that gun with the doctored shells in it and said for me to give it to you two."

"Figured it might be when I noticed Craig's empty holster tonight. Guess he waited until he got to the Rolling R to get another gun," said Solitaire. "I started wondering about him when I heard some of

his horses had been stolen from his stable on one of the raids."

"From what I've seen of Craig's horses, most of those nags aren't worth stealing," said Dismal.

"Just what I thought," agreed Solitaire. "So I've been wondering why the Horseshoe Bunch bothered with them, unless Craig wanted to be sure he'd have something to kick about like the other fellers here after the raid. Craig has brains, all right."

"He had the best chance of anybody to plant that money and note in your saddle-roll," Dismal said to Solitaire. "The horse came back to the livery stable, too."

"Yes," said Solitaire. "And Craig must have killed Lem King."

"Sure I did," Craig boasted weakly. "Wanted folks to think Lawson had come back from the dead and was getting revenge against the seven men who strung him up, so I hammered a bunch of them horseshoes out of shape and scattered 'em around. Left one lying beside King's body, but no one ever said anything about it."

"That's another thing that made me wonder about you," Solitaire told him coldly. "You were one of the seven who lynched Lawson, but you didn't seem at all worried about him coming back from the dead."

"I wasn't worried about him none," growled Craig. "Me and Vance Rand planned it good. We were going to wipe out the three ranchers in the valley. Then when their spreads were for sale cheap, I aimed to buy them. Was going to make out like I had inherited money from a relative I hadn't heard from in years. Then when the railroad runs the spur line into the valley like they're going to do, my property would have been real valuable."

"But the C and P isn't going to run a line into the valley," said Tom Young. "I have been trying to get them to do it, but I recently got a letter from the president of the railroad, saying that since there were only four ranches in the valley, running a line in didn't seem advisable from a financial standpoint."

"I didn't know that," said Craig. "Shucks, I even had the route of the spur line marked off on a map, but the darn thing must have blown away last night."

"Reckon it did," said Dismal. He glanced at Solitaire and grinned.

"You're talking mighty free, Craig," said Shadwell.

"Why not?" demanded Craig. "I ain't got long to live, so it don't matter."

Solitaire stepped forward. He unbuttoned and opened Craig's flannel shirt and examined the old stablekeeper's wound. The bullet had struck high in Craig's right side. Solitaire smiled faintly as he stepped back, but Craig did not see the smile.

"Then you were the man who stabbed Lawson in the alley tonight," Solitaire said. "That right, Craig?"

"That's right," said Craig. "As long as he couldn't

remember who he was, I was willing to let Slash roam around, but when he got his memory back he was too dangerous to stay alive. So I killed him. I knocked out the night clerk at the hotel, too, hoping folks would think Lawson had done it."

"You find out why the night clerk thought Lem King had left the hotel, Matt?" Solitaire asked the sheriff.

"I did," said Gilford. "The clerk found the key to King's room on the desk and figured King had left without anyone seeing him go."

"Sheriff!" exclaimed Irvin Grant, one of Gilford's deputies, as he hurried into the saloon. "We just found Mark Lucan, the Triangle foreman, dead on the road outside of town."

Shadwell glanced at Adam Norton. "Lucan, eh? Somebody finally downed that lobo wolf of yours, Adam."

"Seems so," said Norton. "Thought there was something wrong when Lucan's horse came home without a rider, but didn't get a chance to go look for him. Wonder who killed him?"

"I did," said Solitaire. "Lucan aimed to kill me and Dismal tonight, and we didn't like the idea, so I had to shoot him."

"In a way I'm glad," said Norton. "He was getting too big for his boots. Seemed to think he was boss of the Triangle just because he knew something he'd been holding over me." "Ain't you interested in the confession of a dying man?" Craig demanded impatiently. "I want to tell you how smart I've been."

"I've got news for you, Craig," Solitaire told him. "You're not dying. You aren't even badly hurt. Shucks, a dying man couldn't talk our ears off like you've been doing. You'll live to hang."

"What?" Craig sat up and his eyes flashed murderously at Solitaire. "But I got a bullet in me!"

"Sure—in your shoulder," said Solitaire with a smile.

"You tricked me!" howled the stablekeeper. "Made me confess everything when I didn't have to do it at all!"

"Made you—nothing!" Dismal said scornfully. "We couldn't stop you!"

CHAPTER XXI

The other men were gradually drifting away, for it was late and they were all tired.

Finally there were only Solitaire, Dismal, Shadwell, Young, Norton, Barlow, the sheriff and the deputy standing near Sam Craig.

"Take him away, Irvin," Gilford said, nodding at the leader of the Horseshoe Bunch. "Put him in the jail with the rest of his men."

"Right, Sheriff." Grant reached into his pocket and pulled out a pair of handcuffs, snapped one cuff around Craig's right wrist and the other around his own left wrist. "Come on, Craig; let's go."

As the deputy walked out of the saloon with his now silent and dejected prisoner, Solitaire noticed that Ward Barlow had gone over to the bar, that was again open, and was having a drink.

"I'd like to do some confessing myself," Adam Norton said abruptly, giving the saloon owner a sour look. "This should make you right happy, Shadwell."

"No, Adam," said Shadwell hastily. "Don't say

anything-not now anyway. There's no need for it."

"That sounds kind of funny, coming from you," said Norton. "You forced me to get the money so that you wouldn't foreclose the mortgage on the ranch, Shadwell."

"I did, after you came to me blustering and storming like you figured you were doing me a big favor in making me wait longer for the money," said Shadwell. "You've always been too hot-headed for your own good, Adam. The most fool trick you ever did was robbing that bank in Red Gulch to get the money to pay me."

"Then you knew about that all the time?" demanded Norton, an expression of amazement on his hawk-like face. "Lucan knew, too, and he was always threatening to tell the sheriff. That's why I've been afraid of him and of you, too, Reece."

"You needn't have been afraid of me," said the stout saloon keeper. "I squared you with the bank in Red Gulch, paid back the money and explained you were so drunk you didn't know what you were doing when you held up the place single-handed a week or so ago."

"Shucks," said the sheriff as he stood listening. "You needn't have been afraid of Lucan telling me anything, Adam. I knew all about the bank robbery. Reece told me about it, aiming to make sure I wouldn't make any trouble for you."

"And I've been hating you, Reece," muttered Nor-

ton. "I sure have been a fool."

"Forget it, Adam." Shadwell laughed and held out his hand, and the rancher took it and shook it warmly. "Like I've said before, you never know who your friends are till it comes to a showdown."

"Seems to me that I've heard those words before," said Dismal with a quick glance at Solitaire. "But I like the sound of them better now."

"So do I," said Solitaire. "Much better."

Ward Barlow finished his drink, paid for it and walked over to the little group. The banker seemed to have something on his mind.

"I've been wondering about what you said a little while ago, Day," Barlow said. "You mentioned that Craig had planted the money and the note in Steven's saddle-roll. Yet when the sheriff and his deputies searched you two they didn't find the five hundred dollars."

"How did you know there was five hundred dollars in my saddle-roll, Barlow?" Solitaire demanded. "Have you been working with Sam Craig under cover?"

"Why, of course not," said Barlow. "How dare you suggest that?" He grew conscious that the other men were watching him, and his tone changed. "I'll admit that Craig did come to me in the bank today and tell me that he had discovered five hundred dollars in your saddle-roll he was sure had been stolen from the Red Gulch bank."

"Oh, sure," said the sheriff wearily. "So you came to my office and insisted that I rush out and arrest Stevens and Day right away. It didn't matter to you that Stevens had fought the men who tried to rob your bank yesterday morning, or that Solitaire and Dismal had driven the second bunch of robbers away from the rear of the bank last night."

"I never thought of that," said Barlow weakly.

"Why didn't you?" demanded Shadwell as he stood listening. "You made a long-winded speech about it yesterday morning, and started to make another one in the hotel lobby last night."

"We were beginning to wonder about that," said Solitaire. "You know Dismal and I got to figuring maybe you wanted your bank to be robbed, Barlow."

"Did we?" said Dismal. "I mean we sure did."

"This was a mistake," said Barlow quickly. "I merely asked about the five hundred dollars because I felt that Stevens and Day deserve some reward for what they have done for all of us here. I'd like to suggest that they be presented with the money."

"Good idea!" exclaimed Shadwell with a loud and booming laugh. The stout man's eyes twinkled as he glanced at Solitaire and Dismal. "If you know where the money is, then it's yours to keep, boys."

"Thanks," Solitaire said dryly.

"Nice, Solitaire," said Dismal delightedly. "Now I'm rich and you're handsome."

"It seems that I owe you an apology, Stevens and

Day," said the banker. "In suspecting that you two were the leaders of the Horseshoe Bunch, I made a grave error in judgment, a thing that seldom happens, for I pride myself on my ability to read character at a glance."

What few men there were left in the saloon crowded around Barlow as his voice rose and he continued his speech. The banker was now paying glowing tribute to all of the men of the valley for the way they had battled the raiders.

"This is where we came in, Dismal, "Solitaire said softly. "Let's get out of here."

They headed for the door of the saloon. Barlow was so fascinated by the sound of his own voice that he did not even see them go. Shadwell, Norton and Young listened for a few moments, then went over to the bar and ordered drinks.

When they got out on the street, Solitaire and Dismal discovered that the bodies of the dead men had all been taken away. There were many horses at the hitch-rails all up and down the street. In the eastern sky, dawn was breaking.

"This is the first time I ever knew that a night could be at least forty-eight hours long," said Dismal wearily. "And we aren't even near the Arctic."

"Little man, you've had a right busy evening," said Solitaire. "And so have I. Let's head for the hotel and turn in." "Who's arguing about it?" Dismal said. "Let's."

They entered the hotel lobby. The night clerk was behind the desk, and Rockland looked almost happy. The doctor and the women of the town had finished their work with the wounded and now everyone was gone. The lobby was no longer a first aid station.

Solitaire saw Gail and Ace Tyler standing close together not far from the hotel desk. They were looking at each other as if there were no one else in the world but just the two of them. Solitaire found he was too tired even to feel the old loneliness. He just wanted to go to bed and sleep for at least a week.

When Gail and Tyler saw the two trail partners, they came over to them with radiant smiles on their faces.

"We want you two to be the first to hear the news," Gail told them happily. "Ace and I are engaged!"

"You mean that you two are in love?" Dismal demanded in pretended amazement. "That you're engaged to be married?"

"That's right, Dismal," said Tyler. "I'm a very lucky man."

"And you didn't ask Uncle Cupid first," muttered Dismal so softly that only Solitaire heard him. "I suspect he approves, though."

"Congratulations," Solitaire said with a smile. "I hope you both will always be mighty happy."

"Thanks, Solitaire," Tyler said as they shook hands. "The folks in the valley owe a lot to you and Dismal."

"So very much!" Gail said.

"We didn't do anything that a couple of hombres with a little savvy couldn't have done," said Dismal as he also shook hands with the gambler. "You better always be good to her, Ace, or we'll come back and haunt you." He blinked and shook his head. "No, I take that back. We'd have to be dead before we could be ghosts, and I don't like that idea at all."

"Come on, Dismal," Solitaire said. "I'm tired. Let's head for our rooms." He smiled wearily at Gail and Tyler. "I'm sure you'll pardon us if we say good

night."

"Of course, Solitaire," said Tyler. "See you in the morning."

"You mean later in the morning," said Dismal.

"Wait a moment, Solitaire." Gail stepped closer to him, her lovely hazel eyes fixed on his face. "I haven't forgotten how much we owe you. I'll remember you always. I'm sure Ace won't mind if you kiss me."

Solitaire kissed her on the lips, a brief friendly kiss.

"I helped," said Dismal.

Gail laughed and then kissed Dismal on the cheek.

"Come on. young lady," said Tyler, stepping forward and taking Gail by the arm. "Since you will kiss strange men, I'd better convince you that we are engaged."

Solitaire and Dismal started across the lobby and did not look back as they went on up the stairs.

THE END



